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"BRAYVO FER THE LITTLE WOMAN!" TURK CRIED. "I SAY, PATHFINDER, SHE'S
HOLDIN' THE FORT!"

OR,

The Mountain Spy's Vendetta.

BY WM. H. MANNING.

AUTHOR OF "DARK JOHN," "RUSTLER RUBE,"
"WILD WEST WALT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

OLD ENEMIES ARE SEEN.

THE scout rested his rifle on the branch of a tree and looked along the barrel. The sights covered a human target, and it would have been almost an impossibility for such a marksman to miss at that distance.

"Couldn't I pick 'em off beautiful!" he muttered, with a regretful sigh. "Ef things was reversed I don't doubt they would pull trigger on me as quick as they'd eat venison or manna, but ol' Turkey Todd ain't built right fer an assassin."

Footsteps sounded behind the speaker, and a second man appeared.

"What now, Turk?" he asked.

"Some o' Golf Harmer's gang."

"Spying on us?"
"I reckon."

"Let them try it, and they will receive less consideration at our hands than they did before. We have had enough of them."

He parted the bushes and looked across the half-open space before them. There, two hundred yards away, he saw a small camp-fire with four men around it.

"Bat Bunker and Alf Cone," he commented.
"Et's nobody else."

"What brings them here?"

"W'ot kin it be but mischief? Did you ever know any of Golf Harmer's outfit, an' especially Bunker an' Cone, ter hev decent work on hand?"

"Never, I confess; but it is the exact nature of their present work that interests me. You and I have nothing under way, now, that can make their interference dangerous or annoying."

"Dead-Shot Paul, I'd jest like ter fall onter them, anyhow, an' pay off old scores!"

The speaker drummed with his fingers upon the barrel of his rifle and sent hostile glances toward the men in the camp in a fashion which gave proof of his sincerity.

The locality was in the far Northwest, where the wide plains met the foot-hills. On the east were the prairies; on the west, the rugged ranges which rose and swelled, further on, to the dignity of mountains.

The two men who called themselves Turkey Todd and Dead-Shot Paul or Pathfinder Paul as he was often called, were worthy of any one's careful attention. Each had the appearance of a veteran borderman, but there the resemblance ended.

Turk Todd was a man of fifty, and his gray hair and beard made him look older, though he was as strong and agile as he had been fifteen years before. A rough-looking man was Turk, and none too clean, but an honest, good-natured face saved him from any possible classification as one of lawless nature.

Paul looked to be twenty-six, and an athletic, though not especially large, man he was. One of finer form it would have been hard to find, and his attire, while in every way that of the West, was neat and clean.

His face was bold and frank, but marked with gravity.

"Kain't we worry them?" added Turk, after a pause.

"My advice is that we let them strictly alone. We have no business with those who follow Golf Harmer, and we don't lack much of being square on old scores. We have planned to move on at this hour; let us go, and leave these knaves to their own company."

Turk sighed deeply.

"Jest ez you say; you're captain."

"By whom appointed?"

"By me."

"All right, friend Todd; let's move."

They fell back a few rods to where their horses, refreshed by abundant grazing, were standing under a tree near the scouts' own noon camp, and prepared the animals for the trail.

In this work Turk was unusually slow, and Paul smiled slightly as he realized that his friend was wishing for some chance which would put them into a skirmish with the other men. Turk was not an aggressive man, usually, but he and Paul owed them more than one debt, and the veteran would have been glad to pay it.

Golf Harmer and his men called themselves lumbermen, but the ring of a rifle was more often heard when they were near than that of an ax. They were worthless vagabonds and thieves, and it was believed that human life was not safe when they had a chance to work secretly and silently for their own gain.

Paul Culver was an Explorer, so called, and Turk Todd his assistant; and in their career they had often missed articles of value which, they felt sure, had gone into, and by means of, the hands of Golf Harmer's men.

The two friends mounted and rode away toward the west. Turk's mind was still on his old enemies, and he revolved a chew of tobacco vigorously in his mouth, held his rifle well up, and kept a keen watch.

"Drast their mugs!" he muttered, several times, "don't I wish I could fall up ag'in' them!"

They rode half a mile through sparse timber, and then, as their horses pushed through a thicket, Dead-Shot Paul suddenly tightened the rein.

"Look!" he directed.

"Drast it!"

This exclamation was a favorite with Turk, and was used to express all conditions and emotions of mind. In the present case it meant that he was surprised.

Before them was a miniature canyon, about forty feet wide. On one side was a generally level, but rocky stretch of ground; on the other, a bluff fifty feet high and precipitous, with a shelf at its base, or ground level, two yards wide.

A fallen tree spanned the chasm.

On one end of this log was a man. At the other, standing on the shelf, was a woman. She

held a revolver in her hand, and, confronting the man, was plainly disputing his progress.

He gave signs of wishing to cross, but, not daring to tempt the revolver, stood in irresolution.

"Brayvo for the little woman!" Turk cried.
"I say, Pathfinder, she's holdin' the fort."

"If the fellow ventures further it will be a deadly step," Dead-shot Paul declared.

"What's he merlestin' of her fer, anyhow? Drast it! a man w'ot will annoy a women-folks is a measly coyote."

"We will look into this."

"Sure! But say, I never see a woman in these hyer parts afore. W'ot has sent her? She's a good long way from civilization, an' women don't usually take ter the company of bears an' other grizzlies."

"She may have been abducted, and we will see to it."

"Sartain we will; we'll drop on that ugly man-coyote—I'll bet he's one o' Golf's men—like a rocket. Drast it! but how the little woman holds the fort! She's ez pooty as a posy, an ez brave as a catamount. Shoot ahead, Paul, an' le's inform that feller that he can't run this ranch."

"Wait!"

The young Explorer suddenly pulled his own horse back, and Turk, looking, saw two other horsemen approaching them. Paul's movement to escape notice had not been made soon enough; they were already seen, and the other riders came directly toward them.

"Whom have we here?" the Explorer added.

"Not partners o' the feller on the log; they ain't built that way. They wear store clo'se, an' hev an air o' respectableness, though it may not go very deep."

"Don't you know the foremost?"

"No."

"It is Dave Ashmead, the Mountain Detective."

"Ah! a man-ketcher. I don't like his trade."

"His reputation is good."

"So was Eve's, afore she over-eat herself."

The other riders were now at hand, and Ashmead greeted Paul heartily.

"Hallo, Culver! You are the man of all whom I desire to see. We are in need of help."

"Are you in danger?" the Pathfinder asked, quietly.

"No; but, as usual, I am on a trail. Let me introduce my companion, Ezra Bemis. This is Paul Culver, better known as Dead-shot Paul, the Deep-Range Explorer. Culver, I am after a murderess who has fled to these wilds."

"Can't you find her?" the Explorer asked, casting a thoughtful glance toward the figures by the log.

"I haven't secured her, yet, though I know she is very near here. That's why I asked for your help. I have employed you before, and you know I am no miserly payer; while I know that no man in the Northwest is better on the trail than you."

"You say this woman is a murderess?"

"Killed a woman in cold blood."

"Was there no provocation?"

"No. Why do you always ask so many questions before engaging in the service of law?"

Ashmead spoke with a trace of impatience, but the Explorer's reply was quiet.

"Law is not always justice, sir; or, at least, it is not every accused person who is guilty. No one is more anxious than I to see evil-doers brought to justice, but I want to make sure I am right before I hunt any one—especially, a woman."

The detective bowed slightly. He had heard Dead-shot Paul's views before, and knew he was somewhat of a rarity among men. His own life, devoted as it was to the catching of law-breakers, had made him a skeptic as to good qualities among his fellow-beings, but Paul Culver had imbibed different ideas with the mountain air he breathed.

"In the present case you need have no doubts," he assured. "The woman is guilty, and I am eager to find her."

"Suppose you look yonder."

Paul pointed toward the log, and a cry of delight came from the detective.

"The very woman!" he declared. "By my life, she is run down!"

"Is the fellow who confronts her one of your force?"

Ashmead hesitated for a moment.

"He is not, but I presume he is some mountain-man. See! the woman disputes his passage of the log."

"And ten men can't take her, there," added Ezra Bemis.

"That's where Culver's wits will aid us. Paul, how are we to get her?"

CHAPTER II.

THE CAST OF THE LASSO.

THE Explorer looked thoughtfully at the two persons by the log. The scene there had not changed. The woman held her advantage, and the man, not daring to defy her revolver, had resorted to words. Although nothing could be heard at that distance, it was easy to surmise that he was using threats.

Dead-Shot Paul felt a reluctance which he could not explain to interfere to the injury of this brave woman, but confidence in Ashmead led him to answer presently:

"All is easy enough. She has an impregnable position, so far as direct attack is concerned, but if you will look more generally you will see that it will be the easiest thing in the world to lasso her from the top of the little cliff behind her."

The detective's face brightened.

"Jove! that's a fact. Why didn't I think of it before?"

"Because yer head is too thick!" muttered Turk Todd, under his breath.

"Culver, will you do the work?" Ashmead added.

"I prefer to be excused."

"Sim Ames is the man for the job," remarked Ezra Bemis.

"True. He will do it all right, and we will seek him at once. Mr. Culver, will you accompany us?"

"I think not."

"I would like to see you after we capture her."

"You can find me here."

"All right."

Ashmead hastened away with Bemis at his heels.

"Dead-Shot," remarked Turk, gravely, "I don't like this work."

"What work?" asked Paul, abruptly rousing from meditation.

"The snarin' o' that young woman. She's alone, it seems, an' helpless; an' they are strong men. Et's a mean thing ter do!"

"You forget that she is a murderess."

"Ashmead says so."

"Is there room to doubt him? He is a man whose reputation is of the best."

"True ez you live, Dead-Shot. Only fer that I would 'a' jumped on him an' forbid the work, an', b'gosh! I was tempted to do et, anyhow."

The Explorer knit his brows in a frown.

"I confess that you nearly echo my own sentiments, Turk. I have a vague, peculiar feeling of discontent; a kind of presentiment that I am in work which will prove unsatisfactory to me, later on. It was this, only, which made me hesitate, and I decided not to humor a fancy I could not explain. Yonder woman must not cause us to forget what she is, in law, because she is weak physically."

If Culver had told the whole truth he would have admitted that there was another motive for his hesitation, but it was too vague to be considered. At that distance he could tell nothing about the face of the woman, but her form brought up recollections which made his strong face stern and gloomy.

Turk put one end of a huge piece of tobacco in his mouth and bit off a chew in a most vicious way.

"All right, Dead-Shot," he returned; "you're boss, and yer say-so goes, but I don't feel good over it."

Paul did not answer, and, in silence, without any agreement to that effect, they waited to see the result of the campaign against the young woman.

She and her first enemy kept their respective places without change. Now, and then the latter looked backward as if anxious to see help appear, which he dared not desert his post to summon.

Anon, Ashmead was seen to secrete himself near at hand, and, presently, a borderman appeared at the top of the cliff—no doubt the Sim Ames who had been mentioned.

He held a lasso, and moved quietly and cautiously to the top of the cliff. Then, after a look over the edge, he began to prepare the rope.

"Drast him!" Turk growled.

Dead-Shot Paul's frown became deeper, but he said nothing.

The borderman prepared for the cast, and the girl below remained unconscious of her peril.

He dropped the end of the lasso, and the noose fell squarely upon her shoulders, after which one side fell over her arm.

A better cast could not have been asked for, and he at once drew the lasso taut.

The observers under the tree saw her start; they even believed they heard her cry out; and then she tried to free herself from the coil, but she was lifted nearly from her feet, and surprise and terror would have prevented action under more favorable circumstances.

Her enemy at the other end of the log stared in stupid wonder, but he was suddenly pushed aside and Ashmead ran across the log. Such an advance was not dangerous, then; the revolver had fallen from her hand, and she was helpless.

He reached her side and seized upon her.

"Drast it!" muttered Turk Todd, in growing disgust and resentment.

A signal caused the lasso-thrower to loosen his hold, and Ashmead and his captive had the scene to themselves. There was no struggle, however.

She realized the folly of resistance, and stood passive in his grasp.

Turk turned away and sat down with his back

to a tree, but Paul continued to watch. He saw the unknown woman surrender quietly, after which she was conducted across the log by Ashmead. What was said the Explorer could not tell, but the proud composure of her manner awakened fresh interest on his part.

The other persons disappeared, but it was some time before the detective kept his promise to rejoin the mountain-men.

When he did come he was in good spirits.

"Your plan worked to a charm," he observed, "and I am much obliged to you for suggesting it."

Paul nodded in silence.

"My party is now in camp, and I would like to have you join us for such a length of time as will be convenient and agreeable to you."

Turk Todd lifted his shaggy head suddenly.

"We'll go," he declared; "sartain, we'll go."

"Yes," Paul added, quietly.

"Come on, then."

Leading their horses the explorers followed him. Both were curious to see the woman against whom they had proceeded so unwillingly, and Culver, at least, felt that it would be a great satisfaction if her personal appearance proclaimed her one who deserved no sympathy.

The camp was found in a convenient place, and Paul had a fresh surprise when he saw the numbers of the party, there being no less than a dozen men visible. Nor was this all; some were men not unfamiliar to him. He frowned, while more impulsive Turk Todd exclaimed:

"Drast it! Is this the company you keep?"

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Ashmead.

"Some o' these men are Golf Harmer's pets."

"I fail to comprehend you, though Harmer's name is, of course, familiar to me. I have only two men here. The others are aids I picked up in this vicinity; fellow mountaineers of yours."

"No, sir; no, they ain't!" Turk cried, warmly. "Ef I had kin or fellership with sech reptyles I'd go off an' hang myself, b'mighty! They are all tools of Golf Harmer, an' as big cut-throats as kin be found in the mountains. Ef you like sech company you must be a durned poor critter, b'mighty."

Turk's manner was as blunt as his words, and Ashmead's face betrayed anger.

"I do not think we need to discuss the fine points of the case," he returned, stiffly. "I am an officer of law, sworn to do my best to carry out the directions of my superiors. I enlisted these mountain-men because I needed the help of skilled trailers, I did not ask whether they were saints or sinners, nor do I see that I need to care."

"I reckon you don't keer," growled the scout.

"Let the matter rest, Turk," requested Paul, quietly. "It does not concern us."

"Glad it don't!"

The sturdy veteran had freed his mind, and he fell back and said no more. Ashmead's manner continued to be that of vexation, but Paul commented in a quiet way, which removed the officer's annoyance. Paul did not blame him; he had a duty to perform, and it mattered not what the character of his aids was. It was not to his discredit that, in this case, the character was bad. Skill as trailers was all he had occasion to demand.

Recovering his good-humor Ashmead explained that one part of the camp lay beyond, and that there he would introduce him to a gentleman and lady who, to further the ends of justice, had accompanied him to the wilds in the search for the runaway.

Crossing the glade where the camp was located, they entered a kind of grove, and were passing among the trees when, suddenly, they came face to face with a lady.

Ashmead paused and put on his most appropriate smile.

"Mr. Culver, allow me to introduce you to—"

Thus far he had spoken when he became aware that this was no ordinary introduction. As he looked at Dead-Shot Paul he saw that the latter's face had flushed, and that he was gazing at the woman in a surprised, intent and confused way. Turning toward her he saw all these emotions repeated, and in a more marked degree. Neither spoke, and it was clear that the meeting gave no great pleasure.

"I judge that an introduction is not necessary," added the detective.

Dead-Shot Paul recovered quickly.

"I have seen Mrs. Grantlee before," he returned, coldly.

Mrs. Grantlee said nothing.

"Then it's well you came," continued Ashmead.

Paul Culver bowed stiffly, but the lady remained confused and speechless.

"You met in the States, I suppose?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Grantlee had been making strong efforts to overcome the emotion into which this encounter had thrown her—an emotion which did not augur well for a pleasant occasion in camp.

"I am surprised to see you here, Mr. Culver," she remarked, in a low and unsteady voice.

Paul smiled with the air of one wholly at ease, and calmly returned:

"Why so?"

"Because I—I did not expect you."

It was a weak answer, but, weak as it was,

Mrs. Martha Grantlee broke down over it, and Ashmead looked at the two curiously, and wondered what hidden mystery was in their past.

CHAPTER III.

THE DETECTIVE'S PRISONER.

"You are on the threshold of my home," Dead-Shot Paul returned, in the most matter-of-fact manner imaginable. "There is nothing strange about my being here, for the plains and mountains of this region furnish the ground where my feet tread day by day. This is my home."

Every trace of feeling had gone from his manner, and this served to put Martha Grantlee a little more at ease, though she still found it hard to command words.

While she was seeking for something to say a man came through the timber, and was by their side before they noticed his approach. He soon made his presence known.

"Well, by Jawve!"

This exclamation drew attention, and all looked at him. He was of medium height, but very slender, and in form and face he was alike effeminate. A weak, uncertain face was his, and very light-hued hair and eyebrows, and a slender little mustache, which he wore turned up at the ends, did not add manliness to his appearance.

He looked very much out of place in that wild region.

Giving no one else a chance to recover from his interruption, he rallied and quickly advanced toward the Explorer with extended hand.

"Be Jawve! Culver, I'm glad to see you; mighty glad to see you, you know!"

"Thank you, Mr. Grantlee. It's quite a novelty to see a city man here."

"Of course, of course; New York isn't well represented here, you know. You've been in New York, and I'm deuced glad to see you. I am, be Jawve! I hope the pleasure is mutual. You don't bear me any ill-will?"

Van R. Parton Grantlee's face assumed an anxious expression, while Mrs. Grantlee, who, in brief, was his wife, flushed deeply.

But Paul Culver answered with easy grace and manifest sincerity:

"I bear you only good will, sir, and am glad to see you looking so hale and hearty."

"Be Jawve! do I really look hearty, now? I have been two weeks in the wilds, you know, and I fancied it had made some difference in my muscular development; and now I am delighted to learn you have noticed it, you know."

Mr. Grantlee doubled up a puny hand and gazed anxiously at the puny fist thus formed; then, as a gratified smile overspread his weak face, caressed his upper arm in good humor.

"Snakes an' coyotes!" muttered Turk Todd, under his breath, astonished at this groundless show of pride. "He's like a lamp without oil."

Ashmead suggested that they move on, and it was done. Grantlee walked by Dead-Shot Paul's side, talking volubly, and looking at the athletic Explorer with an expression which often changed from childish pleasure to anxiety.

The Mountain Detective was a close observer, and as he noticed Mrs. Grantlee's flushed face, and her distressed expression, he made a commendably close guess at certain events of the past.

The other half of the camp was only a few yards away, and there Captain Ashmead bade his guests be seated. Turk's inquisitive eyes discerned the female prisoner only a few steps away, though partially concealed by bushes. He was eager to get a good look at her, but the chance was not offered, and he curbed his curiosity.

"Have you eaten?" Ashmead asked.

"Yes."

"Sorry for that, for we have not, but the repast must be about ready, and if you will linger with us, I would like to talk with you presently, in the way of business."

"I am at your service."

Ashmead busied himself about the camp for awhile. He noticed Culver go to Mrs. Grantlee and talk with her. The Explorer's own manner was frank and easy, and his face bore a smile, but she showed confused diffidence worthy of a country school-girl.

Ere long Grantlee came to the captain.

"Are you well acquainted with Culver?" the effeminate man asked, abruptly.

"Yes, and no. I've often met him, but have seldom been long in his company at any one time."

"What sort of a feller is he?"

"A fine man, sir."

"So I think, but—you don't see anything out of the way in his talking with my wife? Eh?"

"Certainly not."

Mr. Grantlee gave his mustache an upward twirl, and assumed a confidential air.

"Circumstances are peculiar, you see, be Jawve! They were once engaged to marry, but I came along, and Mrs. Grantlee preferred me, you know."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, be Jawve!"

Van R. Barton twirled his mustache again,

and looked gratified and proud, but a look of anxiety followed as he again glanced at Paul and his wife. Strive as he might, he could not long look away.

"I dare say it's all right, though," he added.

"You need not fear Culver," Ashmead declared, bluntly. "He is as honorable a man as walks these north plains, and, besides, would never think of going back to civilization. He is wedded to his profession."

"He wanted to be wedded to Mrs. Grantlee, once, be Jawve! but I dare say it's all right."

The speaker had more that he wished to explain, but one of the detective's men came up and took him away, and no chance was given.

Turk Todd did not like their present company, and improved a chance to speak with Paul alone and request him to "hustle away whar the air was not contaminated" by such persons, but the Explorer again bade him be patient. Several minutes passed, and then Ashmead, having finished his business, returned.

"I have ordered the prisoner brought before us as soon as she has finished eating," he observed. "She may worm out of the difficulties and blossom out as a habitual criminal, and you are about so much that I'd like you to fix her face firmly in your memory. In the mean while, I'll tell you the story of her crime."

Paul nodded in silence.

"You have recognized Grantlee and his wife as old acquaintances, so you must know they were originally from the East," Ashmead added.

"A year or so ago they came West, and he acquired quite a tract of land, called it Grantlee Park, and set out to do business in the sanitarium line, and minister to the needs of invalids from the East."

"He had large acquaintances and influence, so he prospered, filled his hotel and was doing well for a time, poorly as he seems fitted for business."

"Among those who came to him was a lady named Mrs. Atherton, accompanied by her maid, Sarah Allen. This lady was somewhat along in years, and an almost helpless invalid. Before she had been at the sanitarium a great while she lost a valuable diamond ring. She told the Grantlees of it, and stated that she believed Sarah Allen was the thief, but bade them mention it to no one."

"She thought if the matter was kept quiet the thief would make some further demonstration, and she was right—fatally right, I may say."

"One morning Mrs. Atherton was found in bed, dying from a knife wound. She lived only a few minutes after being found, and during that time only four words passed her lips:

"Sarah Allen did it!"

"Search was made for the maid, but she had fled. With her went a quantity of jewels and money—how much, only Mrs. Atherton could say, and she was dead."

"I was engaged to find the murderess, and after long search I have succeeded."

"She's over yonder, now."

He pointed to the prisoner.

Deadshot Paul's face cleared somewhat, and he admitted:

"It seems to be a clear case."

"It is."

The Explorer glanced at Grantlee and his wife. In spite of the alleged evidence some doubts yet lingered; doubts born of distrust for those who were Sarah Allen's accusers.

"Does her appearance carry out the claim that she is so bloodthirsty?" he asked.

"I confess it does not. Of course I had no previous knowledge of her, and it was partially to have some one at hand who could identify her that the Grantlees made their great sacrifice of leaving home and coming to this wild land."

"At your request?"

"No. Their idea was a sudden one, and I knew nothing of it until, when I had been a week away from my starting-point, they joined me under the guidance of a borderman. I should hardly have agreed to the step—one being a woman and the other an effeminate man, and, hence, not good persons for the wilds—but I will say both have done well, meeting hardships uncomplainingly."

"They must have been very much in earnest."

"They were. But I will now show you the prisoner. I'll have her brought here, at once."

"Let us go to her, rather than put her on exhibition, like a run-down buffalo."

"As you will."

Ashmead had risen, and he now led the way toward the prisoner. The latter had been sitting without change of position, and did not stir as they approached. Her hand supported her head, which was inclined forward, and her gaze was steadfastly bent on the ground.

The position might have been one of deep dejection, but, to Pathfinder Paul, scarcely seemed to be of that nature; it was more one of deep thought. Her noble form was gracefully inclined, and when, as they reached her side, she finally raised her head, it was no surprise to see a face of like nature.

But Paul Culver saw more.

One glance was enough to show that the trace-

of familiarity of appearance he had before noted had not been an illusion.

He and the prisoner looked each other in the eyes and recognition followed swiftly. On her part it brought no evidence of surprise, but he was not so well prepared.

Not for a moment had he supposed the familiarity of figure, seen at a distance, amounted to anything, and now he stopped short in astonishment.

Not noticing this, Ashmead spoke quietly: "Miss Sarah Allen, allow me to introduce Dead-Shot Paul, scout, hunter and trapper."

Her queenly head inclined calmly, but Paul Culver made no motion and spoke no word. Amazement ruled him fully.

CHAPTER IV.

REVEALED AND UNREVEALED.

ASHMEAD finally became conscious that he had run upon another mystery, and he stood in silence to let the principals work out their own destiny.

The prisoner was regarding Paul Culver calmly, but with much in her gaze that could not be read with certainty, yet with that which had no element of boldness, defiance or bravado.

The pause was but brief; then the Explorer exclaimed:

"Miss Morey, I am surprised!"

"Why?" she asked, quietly.

"To see you here; to see you a—a prisoner."

"Have you heard the charge against me?"

"Yes."

"Judgment has overtaken me, you see."

"Judgment?"

"Don't you regard it as such?"

"Why should I?"

"It is not the fashion for people to think well of me, and you certainly have less cause than any one else to think in that way."

"Did I ever tell you I thought ill of you, or reproach you, or declare any enmity?"

"No, but the past remains."

"The past, as I look at it, is gone with us all. Be we bordermen, statesmen, laborers, or men and women known only in idle life, we can recall the past only in thought, and that is only a phantom invisible even to the sight. What is past need never be thought of. But you—are you the Sarah Allen of whom I hear?"

"I am Sarah Allen."

The reply was very quiet, and gave evidence of no emotion, but Paul still looked incredulous.

"The maid of Mrs. Atherton?"

"Yes; and her slayer!" interrupted Ashmead, somewhat severely, and with evident impatience.

Quickly the prisoner turned her gaze upon the detective.

"That remains to be proven, sir, and you are neither judge nor jury."

"Do you mean that you deny the charge?"

"Emphatically, yes."

"It will avail nothing against Mrs. Atherton's dying declaration."

The prisoner bowed with cold calmness.

"I am surprised to see that you know this woman, Culver," Ashmead went on. "I had learned from the Grantlees that her real name was Rachel Morey, but did not think to mention the fact. Believe me, I did not knowingly give you this surprise. Since you knew her once, perhaps you can give a page from her history?"

The prisoner's gaze was turned upon Paul's face, but he answered calmly:

"I never knew her intimately, but in our casual acquaintance I saw nothing to her discredit. I am surprised that she should be charged with crime, and shall wait for the verdict before believing she is guilty."

Matter of fact as the tribute was it brought a look of momentary surprise to the prisoner's face, and her dusky eyes were full of question-marks.

She was a handsome young woman, this Rachel Morey; and not one whom any person would pick out as a criminal. While her form and general appearance was of that style termed "queenly," her carriage was full of willowy grace, and her every motion was pleasant to the eye. Her face was one which always proved attractive under favorable circumstances, and her manner quiet, lady-like and self-possessed.

Ashmead nodded without knowing just why he did so. Curiosity had led him to bring Paul to the prisoner's side; now he wished to get him away, to question him.

This was not hard. Neither Paul nor Rachel evinced a disposition to converse freely, and the detective soon succeeded in carrying the former away. He and Rachel separated without show of feeling.

"Culver," the detective then said, "what do you know of that woman?"

"Next to nothing."

"When did you meet her?"

"When I met the Grantlees."

The Explorer hesitated, and then added:

"As a boy I was far from strong. My uncle, who was my guardian, sent me to the wilds in charge of an old borderman when I was sixteen.

I remained in this very section three years. Then I went back to civilization and attended school two years. I met the three persons I have named, but soon after returned here, thus losing sight of all of them. That's all there is to it."

"And you thought well of Miss Morey?"

"Yes."

"Did others?"

"Yes."

"The evil in her has since broken out?"

"The trial will decide that."

"What! do you doubt her guilt?"

"She told you that you were neither judge nor jury. The same remark will apply to me."

Ashmead had not been a detective for years without learning to read between the lines. He suspected, now, that he was not getting all the facts, but was wise enough to let the matter rest where it was, as far as Paul was concerned.

He had another idea. He saw Barton Grantlee in the distance, and, knowing that man to be a human sieve, decided that he was the one to question.

He allowed the present interview to terminate as soon as convenient, and then, after a pause, taunted toward his intended prey.

"Grantlee," he began, "when did you first know Rachel Morey?"

"Demit!" Barton exclaimed, "that's just what I was going to explain to you when you shot away from me, took Culver and went over to her. That woman is the one who broke off the match between my wife and Culver."

"Ah!"

"Nobody else. I suppose he was bitter against her, now."

"What did she do?"

"Well, it was like this: My wife met Culver when he was just out of an aristocratic school. She has since said that he was not her ideal, you know,"—here Mr. Grantlee gave his struggling mustache a satisfied twirl—"but he kind of dazzled her with his education and aristocratic family—for Culver is rich, and of a 'way-up family, you must understand."

"Well?"

"Rachel was one of Martha's acquaintances; not a friend, mind you, but just one of the set. She was away when Culver first showed up there, and it was only after the engagement that she came back."

"Proceed."

"In the mean while, I came on the scene, and Culver's chances began to wane. He was not just what the present Mrs. Grantlee fancied, and he soon began to realize that he had no royal road to success. He became jealous and accused her of having changed her mind. She, poor girl! did want to be loyal, but then you see how she was placed. If she married him it would wreck her happiness."

"But the sequel?"

Ashmead was growing very weary of this conceited person's devotion to his own charms, and the last question was curt enough to bring Grantlee down to facts.

"The sequel was that they finally had a regular quarrel, and she gave him twelve hours in which to apologize or become a stranger to her. Well, he wrote the note of apology, as suggested, and gave it to Rachel Morey, to deliver to Martha. Rachel, for some reason, did not deliver it, and when the next morning came, Martha was gone. She and I were married the next day, and he had lost her. Be Jawve! I'm told he made the air blue in venting his spite on Rachel for not delivering the note."

Ashmead was sure he had not heard the whole story, although he doubtless had a correct outline.

Details were of no consequence, for he had himself read the fact that Paul Culver was wholly over his boyish fancy, and the detective was of the opinion that Paul had been lucky to escape alliance with Martha, and that he now fully realized it, himself.

Ashmead was not in a hurry to leave camp on the return journey. He and his men had gone through a hard journey to run the alleged murderers down, and as night was near at hand, he was disposed to get what rest he could.

Somewhat to his surprise, neither Paul nor Turk Todd said anything more about the departure they had recently been so anxious to make.

Whether this was the result of a conversation between the two bordermen, only themselves knew, but they settled down to the camp-life quietly.

The men who had so excited Turk's ire at the start kept in their own half of the camp, and thereby avoided a collision with the veteran, perhaps; but Turk's nerves received even a severer shock before the evening darkness fell.

He and Paul were standing together when Turk suddenly grasped his friend's arm.

"Gallop in' tarantulas!" he ejaculated.

"What's the trouble?" Paul returned.

"Look thar! Look, will ye?"

The Explorer obeyed, and his forehead contracted in a frown.

"Golf Harmer!" he muttered.

"Sure! Et ain't nobody else. He is hyer, an'

hyer as the woman-ketcher's friend, b'gosh! You kin talk all you want ter about Dave Ashmead's good qualities, an' the need o' usin' all possible means ter funder the ends o' justice, but you can't convince me thet any case kin justify takin' in that coyote!"

The object of this severe denunciation had walked into camp in a confident manner, and had been received by Ashmead with more or less cordiality.

Personally, Golf Harmer was a man of about forty years. He was short and very broad-shouldered, and having no superfluous flesh, was a Hercules in his way.

Beyond that he was not attractive. He had tow-colored hair and a scraggly red beard, and his broad, coarse, red face was rendered repulsive by a nose which, singularly flat all along the bridge, turned up sharply at the end.

This peculiarity had gained for him the sobriquet of "Flat Nose."

Knowing the man to be lawless, and the leader of those as bad as himself, and having had more than one trouble with the gang, the bordermen supposed the fellow would keep away from them now, but Turk looked fairly dazed when he saw Golf and Ashmead approaching.

"Thunder an' centipedes!" he exclaimed, "ef that ain't gall, w'ot is?"

Paul Culver did not answer, but an ominous gleam appeared in his eyes.

CHAPTER V.

OLD FOES MEET.

GOLF HARMER had an easy and confident way, and seemed very much at home, and when, after a brief pause, Ashmead conducted him toward the explorers, he acted as if he were about to greet friends.

But Turk Todd gripped his rifle savagely, muttered an emphatic exclamation, and then added in an implacable voice:

"Say, I ain't goin' ter talk harmony ter that cuss. You hear me?"

"You are right, Turk, and I am with you. Ashmead shows mighty poor taste, and Golf is more audacious than usual. They need a lesson and we will give it."

Nearer came the other couple, and Ashmead smiled and remarked:

"I don't think I need to introduce you gentlemen to each other."

"No," returned Harmer, coolly, "we are old acquaintances. Mr. Culver, I am glad to see you again; very glad to see you, sir!"

He held out his hand, as confident as ever, but Paul made no move toward taking it. Without changing his position, he gazed at the hand for several seconds in silence, and then raised his gaze to the mountaineer's face.

"I will not put you to the labor of shaking hands, sir," he remarked.

"No?"

"No! You and I know each other of old, Golf Harmer, and I think you know my opinion of you about as clearly as I can express it. I will not touch your hand, sir!"

"Me, too!" Turk declared, with great satisfaction.

Ashmead looked disconcerted, but the mountaineer preserved his calmness. He even smiled, and affected not to be moved by the rebuff, but the curl of his lip was not all of good-humor. Both his mouth and his evil eyes betrayed his real feelings, and it was plain to Paul that the fellow would gladly have proceeded to hostilities at once.

"All right, fellers," was his answer, made with the transparent assumption of hearty good-feeling. "I hev known you wa'n't 'persessed in my favor, an' it's nat'ral you shouldn't rise up an' howl fer me, but I bear no ill will."

"Satan don't!" grimly remarked Turk Todd.

"You bordermen have your likes and dislikes, like weaker men," commented Ashmead, "but I fancy you are not half so bad as you would have us believe. Let it pass, however, for you meet here under obligations to me which will oblige you to be friendly."

There was an insinuation that he, not the "obligations," would keep them civil, but even Turk did not comment upon it.

"I've got to be assistant to the detectives," remarked Golf, half-closing one eye as he regarded Culver.

"By which, you mean you have helped Mr. Ashmead?"

"That's it."

"To what extent?"

"Only fer me an' my bully boys that gal yender would not 'a' been run down. Ef thar is anybody w'ot knows this region wal, et is me an' my feller wood-choppers," and Golf paused to grin as he slowly spoke the compound word. He knew that his two enemies were well aware that the lumberman idea was only a pretense, and did not care how much he did to strengthen the idea.

He added more briskly:

"When the bosses called on me I jest put my bullies ter work, an' we turned these regions inside out. I tol' Ash we would find the gal. We did. We hunted ev'ry recess an' thicket; we was like hounds on the scent; we bayed an' we follered; we run her down!"

Golf Harmer shifted his position and gloried in his work. From Ashmead he had received the idea that Paul and Turk were very lukewarm, and he wished to irritate them, now.

Turk had turned his back upon the speaker, but the Explorer betrayed no annoyance.

"We made considerable sacrifice ter give the boss a lift in this work. We left our axes a-rustin' in the very sap o' the greenest logs in the woods, an' jest took out the rifles we had laid by fer many a day, an' waded in ter help the law."

"Oul' what a drasted liar!" cried Turk, loudly.

"Eh? What's that?" demanded Golf, his eyes taking on a peculiar squint, and his manner growing aggressive.

"I imagined my English was plain enough; I said you was an infernal liar!"

"I understand that, an' it means *fight*, ef you don't take et back in about two seconds. Will you do it, critter?"

"Take et back? Wal, not ef I know et!" Turk retorted.

"Then, by Beelzebub! it is *fight*!"

The speaker flung down his rifle, drew a knife and was about to spring upon the equally-ready scout, but Ashmead and Paul stepped between them.

"Look here, you two," spoke the detective, commandingly, "you are in the domain of the law now. You can't run things in the off-hand, free-fighting style of the unrestrained West. You are both to blame in this. Drop your quarrel, which is over nothing. Let me hear no more of it!"

Turk was not disposed to force hostilities, and Golf yielded to the voice of authority with more readiness than was to be expected, considering who was against him. Really, he felt that he was triumphing over Turk and Paul by being Ashmead's ally, and he could swallow an insult for the sake of that triumph.

"All right, Ash; all right!" he finally agreed. "I'll obey ye. I never was quarrelsome, though I do hate ter be snubbed by them I kin equal in all ways o' border life an' skill."

"There can be no doubt cast on your woodcraft," Paul returned, easily.

Golf had more to say, and it was always in the way of covert thrusts at the explorers, but he did not have the satisfaction of knowing positively how far he was irritating them. Ashmead invited all to make free about the camp, and no one refused to stay.

As the quartette rejoined the others, Harmer's follower's looked in open-eyed wonder to see their chief on such apparently friendly terms with Paul and Turk. Not that the feud between the two parties had ever been of a bloody nature; it had never been the custom to proceed to hostilities when they chanced to meet; but the Harmerites knew that Paul and Turk hated them, and had cause.

As Ashmead had announced, they prepared to remain in camp over night, and the fires soon served a double purpose; they lighted the scene, and enabled the members to see each other.

The detective, veteran though he was, felt so much pleasure over his success that he commented frequently upon it, but he would not have made the explorers his listeners had he known how lukewarm they were, really.

The finishing touch had been given by Golf Harmer's words. The girl prisoner was accused of crime, but her accusers were persons open to doubt. Was she guilty? However that really was, she had the sympathy of the two men. Hunted by Harmer's ruffians as she had been, she became an object of interest to those who hated him and his methods.

As the time drew near for turning in, Turk came to his companion.

"Pathfinder," he said, abruptly, "ef you're with me we kin shake up this camp a pile afore another day warps inter view."

"How?" Paul asked.

"By rescuin' that fair damsel!"

Turk jerked his thumb viciously in the direction where Rachel Morey sat, and his grim old face looked stern and aggressive.

"Would you do that, Turk?"

"Would I? Tempt me, Pathfinder; tempt me!"

"She is in the hands of law."

"She's in the hands o' drasted pirates, by thunder! Ashmead leads, in name, an' I ain't sayin' a word ag'in' him, but you know the company he is in. Hang the whole measly gang on 'em; I jest itch ter pitch inter them, hoof an' horns. No cause that has Golf Harmer attached to it like a tail to a kite is a good cause, an' Bart Grantlee an' his homely wife don't fill my idee of angels. Nary!"

"All this is true."

"Then be you with them?"

"No."

"Whoop! I thought you wouldn't be."

"Not so loud, and not so fast. Poor as my opinion is of them, it does not change the fact that Rachel Morey is in the hands of an officer of law. It is not for us to say whether she is innocent or guilty; a jury must decide that when she is taken back to the scene of her crime—*alleged* crime."

"Will you see her go back?"

Paul was silent.

"Look at her a-settin' there so meek an' pooty! Kin you think her guilty? Kin *any* man think it? No, sir; not ef he is a man!"

Turk Todd waxed eloquent, and swung his long arm in emphatic gestures. His honesty was unimpeachable, but it was of simple kind, and he could not understand the respect which Paul felt for the law and its servants. Believing the prisoner innocent, he would have been proud of any act he might do to baffle the law.

He did not find Paul so quick of decision as usual; the latter would not consent to help Rachel, nor did he refuse.

He closed a long conversation by saying:

"Give me time to think, Turk. This is a serious matter, and should be treated intelligently. Let us retire like good citizens. If I come to any decision before morning I will let you know. If I don't notify you, you will know what it means."

Turk felt that he would know, and the decision was far from being satisfactory. Although Paul hesitated then, the elder man knew what would be his final decision, barring unforeseen occurrences.

"You're more stuck on the law than a fly on molasses," mournfully remarked the veteran; but he let the matter rest there.

The evening passed uneventfully. Paul did not manifest a social disposition, and would have taken part in no conversation had not Ashmead come to him and made it necessary.

But the detective avoided comments on his latest case. He had, at first, made some awkward moves since the general meeting, but, having learned that his companions bore each other so little good-will, he was wise enough not to try and force sociability.

Of Paul's loyalty he did not have a doubt.

In due time the party spread their blankets and lay down. No guard was set. Attack from any source was not expected, and the prisoner was secure; in no way could her bonds be broken.

Thus reasoned Dave Ashmead, but his wisdom was not infallible. He did not suspect that he had most to fear those in whom he trusted most.

Morning might enlighten him.

CHAPTER VI.

TREACHERY IN THE CAMP.

PATHFINDER PAUL rose so quietly that not a sound betrayed the movement. Every one else seemed to be asleep. The fires cast their light on blanket-wrapped forms, but they were motionless. The Explorer looked for a moment, and then lifted his own blanket and carried it to the extreme edge of the camp. There he again lay down.

Half an hour elapsed.

Suddenly Paul raised his head. He had heard a peculiar sound in the wood; a sound which a novice would have passed dreamily by with the mental comment that it was doubtless the note of some bird; but he had been years enough in that vicinity to know it had no such origin.

The sound had reached his ears before, and led to the suspicion that it had a peculiar meaning. It was because of this he had moved, seeking a spot where his movements would be freer if he desired to stir about.

Again came the peculiar sound.

Paul looked toward the camp and saw another person stir. It was a woman, and she was passing quietly beyond the sleepers.

"Martha Grantlee!"

He muttered the name, contracting his brows thoughtfully. Had her movement anything to do with the cry in the woods? It seemed absurd to suppose such was the case, when her character was considered, but he could not read the visible signs without considering the possibility. Mrs. Grantlee left the camp. Her manner was secretive, as if she wished to avoid being seen and heard, but she went into the darkness without a sign of the timidity one would expect from a woman of such weak nature.

Either the weak nature was not far-reaching in all particulars, or else she had reason to believe she would be safe. Thus reasoned the Explorer.

He fell in behind her and governed his pace by her own, but there was nothing to tell the fact to her. He brought all his woodcraft into play, and his movements were as noiseless as those of a phantom.

After awhile Martha paused and stood silent and, Paul suspected, in uneasiness; but again the supposed signal sounded—now close at hand—and she started on with an air of relief.

A few rods further and a dark figure suddenly appeared in her path. She shrunk back, but a word from the unknown reassured her, and she went quickly to his side. They paused face to face, and her manner was now confident.

Who was the unknown? Even if his face was familiar Paul could not have recognized him then, yet he felt sure it was not Barton Grantlee, Ashmead, Harmer, or any other leader in the camp. Who was it? Was it a member of the party, or a stranger? If so, how did he and Mrs. Grantlee so easily reach an understanding?

They were conversing earnestly, and Paul felt that he would be justified in endeavoring to gain a clew to the subject under consideration. He set out to approach the spot, but, despite the darkness, this was by no means easy. Discovery threatened him, and that meant ruin to his hopes.

By due caution he succeeded in gaining the desired position unseen and unheard. Then he settled down to listen.

The man was speaking in a deep base voice. "We must act immediately," he said.

"But how?" Martha answered. "I can see no way. Can't we defer action?"

"We can, but will not."

"I dread action, now."

"You have more need to dread delay. There is mischief in that woman. Here she can do but little, and, as long as she holds to her policy of silence, is not immediately dangerous. But I scent danger. Her calm manner, I suspect, is not that of despair, but of settled purpose."

"What can she do?"

"Who knows? In our ignorance lies the menace, but this I can say to you: We don't want the case to come to trial!"

"True."

"With a skillful lawyer enlisted in her behalf things might come out at the trial which would set her free and—you can suspect the rest."

"I know, and I am on nettles."

"You and Grantlee have established your reputations by running all over the West to catch her. You are now safe. How will it be if you allow her to be carried back?"

"What do you advise?"

"That the woman be allowed to escape."

"Suppose she won't go?"

"I have thought of that, so we will not rely on her wishes. She must be stolen from you."

"Can it be done?"

"Why not?"

"You are alone—"

"But not a weakling. Rely upon me; I can do what I undertake."

The stranger's voice and manner continued as they had been at first: firm, quiet and confident; and Martha, who had been doubtful and hesitating, suddenly gained fresh courage.

"I only hope you can!"

"Rely upon me," he returned, confidently. "I have not to seek for a way, for it is all in my mind. Silent as the camp is, the woman is so guarded that I cannot steal in and take her away; but I have a better plan. I will create a diversion which will arouse and entertain the whole camp, and when it is over, she will be gone."

"What is your plan?"

"Wait and see."

"I am terribly nervous over this affair."

"Nonsense! There is no excuse for this state of affairs. I have all in the hollow of my hand, and though it may look to you as if the odds were against me, in numbers, that is only a superficial view."

"I wish I had your confidence," Martha sighed.

"You will, when I've won."

All this talk Dead-Shot Paul listened to eagerly, but the fancy which made the unknown conceal his plans from his confederate was even more against the Explorer. Had the stranger seen fit to make an explanation, it would have put the listener on strong ground. As it was, he must work in the dark.

"Now, let us make ready for action!" the unknown suddenly, and more emphatically added. "Return to camp, and await action; but be careful not to betray yourself. Keep out of sight while the disturbance is on, and be careful to lament enough when it is known the girl is gone."

His business-like way did not put Mrs. Grantlee at her ease, and she would have lingered to talk further, but opportunity was not given her.

The unknown took her arm and pushed her away toward camp, and she had to go.

When satisfied that there was no more to be overheard, Paul moved also. Leaving his ambush, he made his way quietly and silently back to camp, and sought for Turk Todd. The veteran, lying wrapped in his blanket, looked like a sleeping man, but when Paul touched his shoulder, he raised his head at once, and very cautiously.

The Explorer made a gesture to enjoin silence. "I'm on!" Turk whispered.

He rose and patted his rifle lovingly, as if assuring that old friend that there was work ahead for it. Without more words, Paul led the way outside the camp.

"Are you ready for action?" he asked.

"What action?"

"To rescue Rachel Morey."

"Bet yer life! I'm ready ter do all I kin fer that lump o' sweetness, an' ter outwit the drasted snakes that lay sleepin' there. An' so you're converted ter my views?"

"Yes."

"Wot did it?"

"Light! Far be it from me to interfere with

the course of law, but when I see the alleged instruments of justice plotting to do ruin, it is time to move. Her abduction has been resolved upon by others, and those who have neither her welfare nor the law at heart. We must beat them off, and the only way to do it is to get ahead of them."

"Wot hev you learned?"

"Much—yet little. Listen!"

In a few words Paul made known the situation as far as he understood it himself, adding:

"We have now reached a state of affairs when decisive action seems imperatively needed. Rachel Morey is to be buffeted about at the will of her enemies, if their plan is allowed to go on, and with the disappearance of their pretense of honor and sacrifice in the name of law, comes a doubt as to her guilt."

"Drast it! I should say so!" Turk agreed, with emphasis; "though fer that, I never believed her guilty. Not by a blamed sight!"

"With our view of the matter I think we are justified in forestalling the unknown, and ourselves getting her away; in plain words, in stealing her from those who hold her here."

"Show the way. I'm jest dyin' ter git a chance, an' delay is dangerous. Lead on, Pathfinder."

The impulsive veteran waved his rifle in a wild way, but Paul did not yield to any such emotions. He was resolute, but he wished to hide his, and Turk's, share in the work, and caution was necessary.

He had formed his plan, and set out, now, to execute it.

He stationed Todd where he would be of the most service, and gave him careful directions, adding:

"I will now venture on the desperate endeavor!"

The elder scout shook his companion's hand, but, for once, had nothing to say. Knowing his friend's nature as he did, even he realized why the last words were spoken so soberly. Paul had seen enough of wild life so that no danger, in itself, could daunt him, but it was no common step for one like him to set out to wrest a prisoner from an officer of law.

The Explorer moved away quietly. The silence about the camp was complete, and with experienced bordermen within its limits it was no small task to do the work in hand. Any unusual sound might arouse them as if by magic.

He moved around to the point best suited to his purpose. For a moment he paused and looked on the sleeping forms, and then quietly leaned his rifle against a tree.

This done he advanced among the sleepers.

His feet gave out no betraying sound, though twice he stepped over those who lay there, and he was soon by Rachel's side. Then the real danger began.

Her head was resting against the tree to which she was bound and nothing gave evidence that she was awake, but, as he put out his hand to touch her arm, she suddenly, quietly asked:

"Well, what is it?"

He held up a warning hand and replied:

"It is freedom, if you are wise. One rash word or movement from you will ruin all, however. These men sleep like watch-dogs. Caution is the price of liberty!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRE-FIEND.

RACHEL looked at the speaker in wonder. It was hard to believe that he meant what his words indicated, but a feeling of indifference to outward events finally led her to answer in her usual quiet way.

"I will do nothing rash."

"Then you shall soon be free."

Defly he cut the bonds, and then caught them up and thrust them in his pocket. He did not intend to leave any more evidence than was necessary.

Rachel was free, and she stood erect by his side.

"You will follow where I lead," he pursued. "I need scarcely add that the greatest caution on your part is now necessary. In a measure your fate depends on yourself, for it is you who must govern your feet. Put them down carelessly and the snapping of a dry stick may arouse the camp. I think you understand. Follow me!"

He turned, and the retreat was begun. A part of the embers in the nearest fire suddenly settled and started a fresh, transient blaze. The light brought the sleepers into greater prominence, and the scene was impressive in the extreme. If Rachel was as anxious as her guide she must have viewed all this with unpleasant dread, but, if so, she did not allow perturbation to affect her movements. Each step was taken with skill which a veteran woodsman might have admired, and they drew near the limits of the camp without mishap of any kind.

When that point was reached he gave her an approving nod, but nothing was said until they were a hundred yards away. Then he paused and broke the silence.

"You have done well, Miss Morey, and again and again testified to your own good nerves and judgment. More than that, you are free."

"As free as the grizzly bears, but not so little

hunted," she answered, a touch of bitterness in her quiet voice.

"I regret to say you are right. To-morrow, if not before, Dave Ashmead will be sharp on your trail, but he must be baffled. Listen! Not far from here is a cave, the entrance to which it would be hard for the best of trailers to find, and in which any one can play the game of hide-and-seek successfully, unless luck was all against him. You must go there."

"I am at your command."

"It's the only safe way. Of course I want to hide my share in this work from Ashmead—"

"You have run the risk of losing your reputation for a most unworthy object?" Rachel exclaimed.

"Suffice it to say I am content," Paul calmly responded. "To continue: Golf Harmer and his men are adept trailers, and great care must be used to baffle them. Once in the cave you must stay there until I notify you all is well."

"As you will."

"Food you will find in abundance. Turk Todd and I have a cache there which I will open, and a part of the cave is full of driftwood, washed in by spring freshets, which will give you a fire when desired. I will add a blanket, and you will, I hope, be comfortable."

"Paul Culver, why do you do all this for one so unworthy?"

"Kindly accept all I do in a philosophical spirit. Men seldom move with the precise system of the revolving world. Is the plan agreeable?"

"It is more than that—Heaven bless you!"

The ex-prisoner's composure was shaken, at last, and her voice was tremulous, but he let it pass without comment.

"Follow me, then, for we want this over with as soon as possible. Turk Todd is on guard, but he cannot govern sundry invisible things. We will go briskly, but not without a degree of caution."

Silence fell between them, and the Explorer conducted her along the rough ground, which lay east of the camp, for some time. At last he bent his steps along a shelf of rock, on one side of which was a chasm, and on the other, a seamy ascent which was not unlike a series of rough, short pillars supporting a roof. Into one of these recesses the guide finally turned, and after proceeding deviously for some yards, finally reached a straight passage which he followed for several rods.

Then he paused, fumbled around a recess in the wall, and brought out a half-consumed torch. With this again lighted he then showed the cave, in part; a roomy place, certainly, but gloomy, and so dark that the light revealed but little more than themselves.

Losing no time, Paul made a fire of the driftwood in a place where he and Turk had before then burned a like fire, and spread the blanket on the old couch of pine boughs. Then he opened the cache and placed its contents at her disposal. Next he went out and brought in the fresh meat he and his ally had left at dinner, and she was well supplied.

All this had taken less time than might be supposed, and he kept up the record. He bade her good-by by the fire.

"For now I must leave you, but do not think it is permanently. Turk and I have not gone so far only to desert you, after all. We will come here, anon, but I am imperatively needed elsewhere, now, if your retreat is to be covered. It is for your interests that I should go."

"Do as you think best. Don't think of me! You have been very kind, and I am ready to leave all to your prudence and sagacity."

"Good-by, then!"

He held out his hand, and her own rested momentarily in its clasp. Then she drew back a little, and added:

"Don't think of me. Look well to yourself."

He went out. At the entrance he paused for a moment and looked back. She stood by the fire, looking, not after him, but down at the fire, her manner that of one lost in thought.

Despite this, he felt sure her mind would soon be actively on her surroundings. The big cave was gloomy, and the fire, as she would readily discover, made her plainly visible to any hostile eyes that might be near, without serving to dispel the darkness which, it seemed, one might almost feel. A more timid person would well yield to terror there, when beset with known and unknown dangers, and all of Rachel's bravery would hardly suffice to make her indifferent later on.

"It must be," he muttered. "Be the result what it may, she will have to stay alone."

He left the cave and went swiftly toward the camp. As he neared it he felt real surprise. He had hoped to regain his place before there was any alarm, but had not felt any confidence that it would be so. Now, the silence indicated success.

Turk Todd was at his post. A few words were sufficient between them, and then they returned to their blankets. They feigned sleep, but Paul's open eyes were surveying the dark sky and darker landscape as he awaited the next act.

When, and how, would it come?

Where was the unknown? Why was his stroke deferred? Had he abandoned his purpose?

A sound rose from beyond the camp; a noise like the call of a night-bird, but one which Paul easily recognized as being the same which had preceded Martha Grantlee's departure from camp. Then he felt sure the crisis was at hand. How would it come?

Five minutes passed; then, suddenly, a strange sound burst upon his ears—a sound like the blast of a steam whistle, but louder and fiercer, and more of a scream and shriek, combined, than an ordinary whistle would make, and of more volume than any human throat could send forth.

And at almost the same instant, and before the sleeping men could awake—though they were sure to arouse quickly—there was a rushing, whirring noise, and the darkness was dispelled by a bright light.

Then into view flashed a thing no one could name—a shape of fire; a creature strange and dread. It was like a burning wheel, for something was seen to revolve, and from it flashed sparks and streams of flame which swept over the recumbent forms.

"Over-the-Fire!" cried Turk Todd, in a startled voice, and his uplifted head fell flat and was quickly covered with his blanket.

Other men were starting up, and they, too, saw the object, but only to fall down as Turk had done, and cover their heads; but by that time the thing of fire had reached the further side of the camp. It encountered the underbrush, and then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the fire went out. Darkness and silence prevailed once more.

Several moments passed, and then, one by one, the campers uncovered their heads; and the general comment went round in hushed voices:

"Over-the-Fire!"

Some who were there would not have risen, then, for any inducement, but the bolder ones sprung to their feet. Among them were Golf Harmer and Ashmead, and to the latter's side went Paul and Turk.

The Explorer had grasped his rifle at the first disturbance, and was eager to investigate, but the necessity of acting an innocent part was so strong he had curbed all impulses.

Now, he was ready to act his part.

"By the Old Nick!" cried Golf Harmer, "we hev got dead men hyer!"

"What in perdition was it?" Ashmead demanded.

"You've got a pretty close guess at et. It wa'n't in perdition, but a thing of perdition let loose. Et was Over-the-Fire!"

The reckless rover dropped his voice to a hushed pitch as he spoke the last words, and looked around as if he expected some secret attack. All of his followers formed in a group, and they were a meek and quiet lot, then.

"Was it really Over-the-Fire?" Ashmead asked.

"Ask Culver."

The outlaw pointed to Paul, who, glad to be thus singled out, answered:

"There can be no doubt of it, though I never saw the Fire-Slayer before. What do you say, Turk Todd?"

"Over-the-Fire, sure enough, by mighty!"

Stout-hearted Turk made the corroboration with the same nervousness shown by Harmer, but Paul saw his object attained; it would be easy, later, to prove that they were by the detective's side.

"The fiend is at work," commented a mountaineer, uneasily, and with a fearful glance toward the wood.

"The boyees are all up, though," added Golf. "I don't reckon we hev any dead men fer a keepsake. I only hope he won't canter back through the camp ag'in. Ef he does, 'Squire Ashmead, fall flat an' kiver up yer face. Et'll keep off the fire."

"I want to look into this!" declared the leader. "I don't understand anything so strange. I'm going to investigate."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TRACK OF OVER-THE-FIRE.

ASHMEAD spoke with resolution, and, turning to Paul Culver, asked for his company. The latter was ready, and a look at Turk was enough to add him to the party. As a result, the three, with Golf, went together. Ashmead armed himself with a brand from the fire, and it was he who led the way.

He took the path followed by the invading thing, and followed to the bushes where it had last been seen. There he came upon a small, blackened pile of—what? No one could say. Viewed in an ordinary light it would seem to be the ashes of some object, but few of the campers could have been brought to take an ordinary view of the case.

Beyond, the bushes were not broken or disarranged, so Ashmead stopped and moved the fragments with his foot, exhibiting an analytical spirit.

"So this is all that remains," he murmured, in a dissatisfied way.

"The blaze went out hyer," Golf answered.

"And suddenly, too. It was like, and yet more radical than, the collapse of a balloon. Men, you are old borderers, and persons of sense. What is your idea of Over-the-Fire?"

"Et's a demon; a slayer; a—a— Wal, I don't know w'ot ter call et, but you kin see w'ot et's like."

So spoke Golf Harmer, but Ashmead did not seem satisfied. He turned to the next in line.

"And you, Mr. Culver?" he questioned.

"You must be content with a practical reply from me, for I am not superstitious," Paul returned. "I don't believe that spirits, demons or fiery monstrosities move among us without being subject to reasonable explanation. Holding the views I do I cannot credit the claim that Over-the-Fire is of Satanic origin. If I disbelieve that, I can only believe that the brain of man created him, even as the hand of man must control him, or it."

"Man, eh?" snorted Golf, scornfully. "Bah! You talk nice, an' sling in long words an' phrases like a college professor, but et won't go. You can't convince men o' sense that Over-the-Fire is a man! What says Turk Todd? Speak out, man!"

Turk shook his head.

"I ain't got a word ter say," he responded.

"He's with me!" affirmed Golf, triumphantly.

"Of course he is; all sensible men would be. I say Over-the-Fire is a demon. Who kin prove otherways?"

"Tell me all you know of it."

"So I will, Ash, an' this is the story: Fer over a year a demon has been seen on the prairies an' in the mountains. You see, ter-night, how he appeared, an' he always comes that way. Et is his favorite game ter dash inter a sleeping camp an' skeer everybody silly."

"Now, there is often more to et, yer know. Over-the-Fire wa'n't visible, ter-night, though I won't say he wa'n't there. How much o' the thing is him, an' how much ain't, nobody knows."

"But, sometimes, right over—right on top o' the part you seen ter-night, there is a blood-red figger which is like the pictures we see of the Old Nick, hisself. I ain't never had a view of it, myself, an' I don't hanker fer one—not I! This red figger is Over-the-Fire, hisself. Demon? Wal, ef he was anything else, how would the blazin' fire o' the lower part o' the outfit affect his anatomy? Why, a human would git singed ter a crisp."

"That settles et that Over-the-Fire is a demon!"

"Ter-night the red figger wa'n't there, an' furthermore no harm was done; but there has been times when there was. You seen the sparks flashin' out ter-night, of course, like shootin' stars. Wal, sometimes when the Fire-Slayer rides through a camp he leaves dead men behind him, an' they hev ragged holes through 'em, with black, scorched edges ter the wounds, as ef 'twas done with balls o' brimstone."

Golf gave this statement as confidently as if he knew the precise effect of "balls of brimstone," but it was to another point that Dead-shot Paul gave attention in his quiet reply:

"Have you ever seen men slain thus?"

"No, but others have."

"You believe it all, then?"

"Thunder! Of course I do! Don't you?"

"With reservations. I am compelled to believe that dead men have been found in camp, shot, after some of Over-the-Fire's raids, but I'm not ready to admit he did the slaying. If he did, I should want to see the wounds before believing they looked as you say. We must all allow something, in all cases, for a traveling rumor. We all saw the shooting lights to-night; the fiery tails, as it were; but no one was injured."

Ashmead watched the two speakers closely. One represented superstition and the other intelligence, but, in the present case, he was not sure that he knew which to take as his guide.

"Culver, I can't understand all this," he admitted. "The thing which rushed through our camp, without any visible governing power, went out in sudden oblivion, here. Only this pile of stuff is left."

"The ashes of the fiery chariot, if you take my matter-of-fact view of it. The other theory is just as cheap, and far more striking and thrilling. All the way from Bismark to Milk River Ridge and Bozeman, plainsmen, mountaineers and settlers, will tell you of Over-the-Fire, the demon mystery. Women and children shudder and turn pale at mention of his name, and stout-hearted men grow weak when they see the Fire-Slayer. If all reports are to be believed, the graves of his dead milestone the way from the junction of the Missouri and Cheyenne to the heights of the Rocky Mountains. A dread being, surely!"

"Now you talk hoss sense, ef you don't mean et," declared Golf. "You sneer as you talk, but you hev got down ter truth, at last."

"Thank you, sir!"

Paul made the answer shortly, whereupon Ashmead turned away suddenly.

"We will not stand here all night to chatter over it. Demon, or not, Over-the-Fire has gone. Let us hope he will not return. I'll look to my prisoner, and then, for one, I'm going to sleep again. At least, I will if all is well with us."

The last words were spoken in a different tone, and were brought forth by the sudden recollection that he had for the time utterly forgotten

Rachel Morey, and that something unpleasant might have occurred during the interval since he saw her last. He realized that he ought to have thought of her at once, instead of running after Over-the-Fire like an old woman devoured with curiosity.

A few long steps took him to where the prisoner had been left. Then he made an outcry.

"Here, you! Bring a brand here at once. May the Evil One take us for fools if she's really gone!"

The last words were in an undertone, and he floundered around in a headlong search for Rachel. She was not bound to the tree, as she had been left, but he did not see how she could have got far away.

One of his men brought the brand quickly, and its light was enough to soon settle one point. Not only was she gone from the tree, but she was nowhere in that immediate vicinity.

His voice rose louder than ever, and soon brought all the campers to his side.

"Sarah Allen is gone!" he shouted. "She has taken advantage of the confusion to escape. A hundred dollars to the man who first lays hand on her!"

"Gone!" cried Van R. Barton Gantlee, in a shrill voice. "Be Jawve! you surely can't mean that?"

"Fool! do you think I would joke?"

"But how could she get away?"

"The devil only knows."

"Mebbe some of our highly moral folks know," suggested the mountaineer chief, pointing directly at Paul.

"Golf Harmer," retorted the Explorer, "say that again and I will knock you down!"

"I'll go bail for Culver's innocence, myself," affirmed Ashmead. "I'd suspect myself, just as quick. But why do we stand here wrangling over a side issue? She is gone, and that is the principal point. Men, remember my offer: a hundred dollars to him who finds her. Away, all of you, and do your best. Away!"

The detective's voice betrayed the force of the blow which had fallen upon him. He had no personal motive to influence him; love and hate did not enter into the affair with him; but he had a stronger motive. His professional reputation was at stake. If he lost the prisoner after having her once in his hands, and the news went home, he never would be the Dave Ashmead of old.

The offer was enough to stimulate the ordinary followers, and they rushed away.

"Culver," he added, "I'd give more for you and Turk Todd than all the rest. Are you not going?"

"Since you ask it, I will, though I am not zealous. And it seems to me Mr. Grantlee and his wife are not so red-hot as they were."

"Be Jawve! I'll add a hundred to Ashmead's offer to him who finds her!" declared Barton.

"Go yourself, Mr. Grantlee," urged his wife. "Let no effort be spared to seize that evil woman."

Paul smiled gravely. He believed he could read the couple clearly. They, or, at least, Martha, thought that Rachel was in the hands of the Unknown—the man whom Mrs. Grantlee had secretly met—and they had remained passive until forced to come to the front. They might get information, later, which would make them more eager to see her recaptured.

The searchers went out, and though some of them still remembered Over-the-Fire with dread, the promised reward made them eager to do the work quickly. Some adopted the idea that Rachel might be in hiding near at hand, while others took the theory of rapid flight.

Each party acted according to its surmise, but at daybreak, the men came in, by twos and threes, and every face wore a weary, disappointed expression.

Ashmead seemed utterly disheartened for a while. Weeks of labor had been rendered useless by the escape; and the whole Northwest was again ahead of the fugitive. It certainly was hard, but presently he rallied, and asked the best trailers to see if they could find any footprints which would show what help, if any, Rachel had received.

This was an eventful period for Paul Culver, but the result proved that the constant tramping about the camp had made everything safe.

Even Golf Harmer, who was still suspicious of his old rivals, failed to find any evidence.

"We will breakfast now," finally spoke Ashmead, irritably. "After that there will be a general search, and with the light of day to aid us, we ought to succeed. I am going to find Sarah Allen if it takes a year's hunt!"

CHAPTER IX.

TURK TODD YIELDS TO WRATH.

NOON found the party again in camp, but Rachel Morey was not there. The men ate dinner in sulky silence, and it was evident that a storm was brewing. It broke forth when the meal was finished.

"Boss," began Golf Harmer, addressing Ashmead, "me an' my mates want a talk on this subject."

"Speak out!" was the brief answer.

The mountaineer glanced around the circle, his gaze lingering longest on Dead-Shot Paul's calm face, and, seeing that all were within sound of his voice, proceeded:

"My bullies an' I are old borderers. The plains an foot-hills has a voice to us which the greenhorn don't hear, nor see, nor feel. What we don't know about our biz ain't worth knowin'. Et's our callin', you see, an' our pride is in it. When we tackle a job we want ter do it wal. We gobbled that gal an' felt good over it, but where is she now? Where? I say. Wal, b' thunder! she ain't here; that's sure. She went, but did she go without any power but her own? Not by a durned sight!—she had help!"

He paused and looked around the circle again, and it was evident that a fight was on. As before, his gaze dwelt longest on Pathfinder Paul's face.

"Who helped her?" he suddenly added.

"Tell me that," Ashmead exclaimed, "and I will reward you well."

"Who was lukewarm about seizin' her afore? Who doubted her guilt when the guilt was proved? Who hung off when everybody else hung on?"

Pausing dramatically, the mountaineer pointed directly at Paul and added:

"That's the man!"

An approving murmur rose from Golf's followers, but it was checked as Turk Todd flung two or three of them out of the way and confronted Harmer.

"Youskulkin' coyote!" shouted the big scout, "you've got ter be licked fer that. Pathfinder Paul is my pardner, an' ef he has got scruples ag'inst soilin' his hands by thrashin' a drasted sneak, I ain't. You measly old mountain sneak-thief, trap-robber, camp-plunderer an' carrion crow, I'll show you that some decent men ain't ter be insulted!"

Honest Turk was in a rage, and was only waiting to free his mind before assailing Golf. The latter was equally eager, and as both were of great strength and skill the spectators would soon have seen a great fight, but once more Ashmead acted the peacemaker.

His ill-assorted followers were always in need of restraint.

Stepping between the present hostiles he boldly exclaimed:

"Keep your hands down, or you will both have to fight me! You fellows are too hasty. Can't you hear a word, ill-advised though it be? Todd, you are too hasty. Harmer, you make rash charges. Fall back, both of you. Lord! can't you bear this escape when I am taking it coolly?"

"I don't keer a cuss what we hear on that head," stoutly returned Turk, "but that drasted snake can't insult me nor my friends."

"Were the insults all on his side?"

"Turk Todd has called me every vile name he could put his tongue to," observed Golf, an evil gleam in his eyes. "We'll let et pass fer now, but he will hev to answer fer it, later."

"Choose yer time, mister!" Turk retorted.

"Allow me to ask," put in Dead-Shot Paul, "upon what grounds I have been accused of spiriting the late prisoner away. If my guilt can be established I deserve censure, but if yonder honest lumberman has made a charge upon bare suspicion, I claim your help to confound him, Mr. Ashmead."

"And very properly."

Golf stood in silence. He could not prove his insinuation, or give any good grounds for the charge. He knew it, and felt that he was cornered, and for the time, helpless.

In the lull Paul saw Barton Grantlee speaking in an aside to his wife, and heard him say in a louder tone:

"Your time may never come again. Speak, and render this fellow silent. He bated us in the East; he must hate us here. Speak!"

Quietly the Explorer fell back to where the Grantlee's stood.

"Before you speak," he advised, coolly, "remember the man you met last night outside the camp!"

Martha's sharp, gray eyes had flashed resentfully as he began to address her, but the light went out utterly as she heard the unexpected and startling finish. She stood gazing at him in blank dismay.

"I am not a hard man," he added, in an unmoved voice. "I see no reason why we should quarrel, or accuse each other."

Unfortunately for Mrs. Grantlee, her husband did not hear these words. He did see that Paul was addressing his wife, and, not being wise enough to understand that he need fear nothing when he was not four feet away, his old jealousy flamed up. Suspecting the Explorer of making a plea for mercy, based upon mutual regard between herself and Culver, he loudly exclaimed:

"Mrs. Grantlee has something to say. Listen to her!"

Every gaze was turned upon the woman, but the ears of the gazers were not touched by the sound of her voice. She stood silent and confused. She dared not speak, and her rash husband had put her in an embarrassing position.

"We are at your service, madam," remarked Ashmead, politely.

She aroused, and flashed an angry glance at Van R. Barton Grantlee.

"I have nothing to say, sir, for the very good reason that I know nothing."

Grantlee grew white with anger.

"I protest against this; I protest against any one holding back the facts when—"

He stopped abruptly. His wife had gone quickly to his side and whispered: "You fool! be still! Culver saw me with our aid, last night!" And Barton, upset by this unexpected danger, stood with open eyes and mouth, further speech frozen on his lips. Nothing could have induced him to speak then.

Ashmead's eyes gleamed for a moment, and then he became wholly calm. He was shrewd enough to be aware that he did not have the inside facts from any one of that trio. He knew not what the secret was, but he would have been dull not to understand that they were keeping something back.

His first impulse, that of trying to force them to open speech, was soon abandoned. In that wild region he could not rely upon the help of law to press coercion, for law was unknown. He must be patient.

"Well, madam?" he calmly questioned.

"Mr. Grantlee spoke under a mistaken impression, sir."

"Mr. Grantlee, may I ask what your impression was?" promptly asked the detective.

"I? Eh? Be Jawve! I hadn't any, you know."

"I didn't know. But what led you to think you had an impression?" Ashmead added, with sarcasm.

Van R. Barton wiped his perspiring face nervously. It was bad enough to know that Paul Culver had a part of his and his wife's secrets, but, to make matters worse, he must lose caste with Ashmead.

"Confound it! I misunderstood my wife!" he finally declared, nervously.

"Misunderstandings seem common."

Ashmead stepped back and then added:

"Can any one give light, here?"

If anybody could, the fact was not mentioned. Golf Harmer looked volumes, and suspicion bristled in every page. He squinted accusingly, inquiringly and suspiciously at the others until his eyes were only two quivering gashes back of his flat nose. For once he saw too much to be expressed in words. With so much opposition he became as eager to run Rachel Morey down as a bloodhound spurred on by devouring hunger.

Ashmead was growing more angry, but he determined to foil those who were now working against him, and he turned to the mountaineers.

"I have made an offer to whomsoever catches Sarah Allen," he remarked. "The offer still stands. Away on the trail, and see to it that you don't tire."

The word was sufficient, and they went with dispatch. Ashmead accompanied them, not once glancing at his former best friends, Dead-Shot Paul and the Grantlees, but the two Explorers were not to be left behind. Without giving sign that anything unusual was afoot, they fell in with the searchers.

"I doubt if they find the cave," Paul remarked, "but we will be at hand to warn her in good time if there is danger of it."

"Drast 'em! ef this kind o' work goes on I shall yet bust inter bits!" declared Turk. "You may be made of cast-iron, but I ain't. I feel fer that little woman, an' I'd jest like ter walk all over them critters."

"The chance may come. Perhaps I ought to visit her, now, and see how she is getting on in the cave."

"Do it! Le's both go. Et's a dark an' gruesome place, an' I wouldn't wonder ef even her brave spirit is shook. Le's go, by all means; le's go!"

They went, accordingly, and found Rachel making the best of her situation. She had prepared and eaten breakfast, and was still further improving her quarters. She still showed the singular courage of old.

"Yes; it is dark, here," she admitted, "but not so dark as the minds of those who hate blindly and bitterly. I have gone not out of Eden, but into it."

"Drast it! but there's pluck fer you!" Turk declared, admiringly.

"Miss Morey," Paul added, abruptly, "we have heard one version of how Mrs. Atherton died. Could you give another?"

"No."

"Had she an enemy?"

"I know next to nothing of her private affairs. She was kind to me, but did not make me a confidante. She may have had a score of enemies; I have not."

"How about the Grantlees?"

"I do not know that they hated her."

"But what of her alleged statement, when dying, that you did the deed?"

"I do not believe she ever said so."

"Course she didn't!" declared Turk. "Ef she was a decent woman she would never hev told such a lie; but the Grantlees are equal to it, b'mighty!"

"And your sudden departure, on the same night she was slain?"

Quietly Paul asked the question, but, for once, Rachel was not ready with her reply. She sat in silence.

CHAPTER X.

A MAN WHO MAY BE A MYSTERY.

At last Rachel looked up.

"If I were worthy of any care, or of the labor which the championing of my cause would bring any one, I might urge upon you reasons which would make my case seem less dark. As it is, I can only say, that I left to do a favor to a certain person, and the step has brought with it untold trouble. I see no way of disentangling myself from the net, and, if you will excuse me, I will not try."

Thus she answered, but it was a reply which did not satisfy her listeners.

"You don't intend to bow to adverse circumstances?" Paul inquired.

"I don't know," she returned, wearily.

"You can't live forever in this region."

"I can, at least, die here."

"Now you do not talk like your sensible self. Such words are weak, and do not befit you. Be courageous! I know not where the right of the case really rests, but I bid you be hopeful. More than that, you can in no way better bind friends to you than by trusting them. No one likes to work in the dark, you know."

"Paul Culver," Rachel exclaimed, "I know not why you help me, anyway. There is nothing in the past to lead you to trust, help or feel friendship for me, as you view the past. Better leave me alone, now, and let me work out my destiny."

"Leave ye!" Turk exclaimed. "Not much, little woman! We are bound ter fight in yer cause while our toe-nails hang on!"

"I doubt, Miss Morey, if you know how I 'view the past,'" Paul quietly remarked, "but I am not disposed to insist upon confidence you are reluctant to give. Let the matter rest for now. As for us, we must go away, to ward off suspicion. Our share in your escape is already suspected, and we must be on the alert to keep down suspicion. We go, for now, but will soon return."

After a hurried parting they left the cave, and, by rapid progress, soon joined the other searchers.

The opinion was general that the fugitive was not far away, and they governed themselves accordingly. Harmer's men were looking both for hiding-places and the trail, and the last fact furnished the chief danger. Skillful as they were at reading the signs of the earth, they were no mean enemies to have seeking for Rachel.

Well did Paul and Turk act their part. They were always near Ashmead, and simulated a degree of earnestness without too much zeal.

But the hours wore on without bringing discoveries, and Rachel's friends felt that the danger was over for the day, unless some chance proved more troublesome than system.

During this period Paul had several times seen Barton Grantlee and his wife, but had given them no especial attention. But, finally, he found himself on the outskirts of the party, and he came suddenly upon a scene which proved to be of great interest. Two persons were there, and in earnest conversation. One was Martha Grantlee; the other was a man whose face was wholly unfamiliar. This person certainly had not figured among Ashmead's adherents, and the free way in which the woman conversed with him, at once aroused a natural suspicion.

Was it the Unknown?

Paul was not yet seen, and he stepped back into the cover of the bushes, and prepared to act a secret part.

Mrs. Grantlee was speaking, and that, too, rapidly, while her rapt manner and frequent gestures told that she spoke on no trivial subject. The man stood erect, attentive and thoughtful, and gave her full sway.

Physically, he was one who ran too much to flesh to be graceful or pleasing. He was less than forty years old, and full of life and health. His face alone was impressive. That was grave, dignified, and full of power; and there was something in it which did not speak well for him; it bespoke a cruel nature.

Dead-Shot Paul believed he had made a valuable discovery. Unless all signs went for nothing, this was the Unknown, and the man who would have seized Rachel had not some one else forestalled him.

Martha ceased speaking, and he took up the thread of conversation, showing as much rapidity of utterance as she. He made short, sharp gestures, too, and the impression grew upon Paul that he was not looking upon any ordinary man.

Whatever the stranger had to say was soon finished, and when he made a motion for Martha to leave him, she went without remonstrance. Paul felt that it was too good a chance to learn more of the man to let slip, and he set out to follow him, but, for once, his woodcraft, together with the fact that Martha was in the way of prompt action, did not serve him well.

He failed to get sight of the stranger again, and his trail was lost in the ledge-lapped soil.

Giving it up at last, in no contented frame of

mind, the Explorer rejoined his companions just as they began to gather to go to camp for supper. Mrs. Grantlee was there, and looking more contented than before.

There was a comparison of notes, all of which showed no favorable results, and then they returned to the place where the previous night had been passed. Supper was soon under way, with two of Golf Harmer's men as cooks.

Ashmead sat in conference with the others, but to no one did he show his old manner. Things had gone wrong, and he doubted every one—Paul, Turk, Golf and the Grantlees. To the loss of his prisoner was now added the question: In all the party, had he any one upon whom he could rely except Ezra Bemis, his own detective aid?

Being in this mood, he was curt of speech, and conversation was not progressing briskly. It was suspended wholly, presently, and by an event not to be expected.

"Hello!" exclaimed one of the men, suddenly, "who comes there?"

All looked up. They saw a stranger walking into camp; a short, plump man, who seemed very much at ease, and in expectation of a cordial welcome. Nobody had seen him until he was close at hand, and he came on foot and unarmed, as far as could be seen.

A stranger in that remote region could not but interest every one. But Paul Culver was more than interested. The man was the same he had seen in conversation with Mrs. Grantlee but a short time before.

A great change had taken place in his appearance, however, and all caused by the expression of his face. The gravity, dignity, and look of power no longer showed; he was smiling, and his plump face appeared as innocent and bland as a child's.

He was like an entirely different man.

He came to a halt before the group, and made a long, awkward gesture.

"White men are my kind, and they are my color!" he declared. "Give me good, pale faces, and I'll say, 'Reds be darned!' That's my way!"

"What in thunder do we care what you think o' whites or reds?"

It was Golf Harmer who made the answer, and no one else evinced any disposition to say anything, but the ungracious reception did not trouble the new-comer. His smile grew broader, if possible.

"That's the point, exactly," he agreed. "You don't care, but I do. Why? Simply because I've had my share of reds, and the dose did me no good. You see me sans weapons, sans horse, sans money, sans everything but an appetite crying like a voice in the wilderness. Do you see the point?"

Still smiling, he nodded and chuckled with a show of great good-humor.

"Who are you?" Ashmead curtly demanded.

"Eli Gulliver, by name; but not the same Gulliver who did up the Lili-what-you-may-call-'ems. I fell among men who girthed a good bit more, and whose stature was only equaled by their inhospitality. Lo, the poor Indian, took me in and did me up."

"You show no signs of hard usage."

"The Gullivers are hard to down. I should bear it all with composure, but I've lost a good stout keg that can't be replaced in these regions, and its contents."

"Lost a keg? What do you mean?"

"Sir, you may talk of the honesty of the noble Red Man, but when a fellow steals what you try to sell him, and the keg, it shakes one's faith."

"I reckon you're a whisky-trader?" suggested Golf.

"I was, before the purchasers closed out my stock, but now I am a grub-trader. The voice in the wilderness is crying loudly, and it won't be appeased. I'm dead broke and hungry. But why should the spirit of mortal be proud! That whisky will shorten the lives of the red gentlemen ten per cent; I know because I made it."

Harmer and his men laughed, and even Ashmead so far forgot his troubles as to smile, but Dead-Shot Paul saw no joke. He knew the self-styled Eli Gulliver was lying, and the ease with which he did it, his sudden change from a stern and dignified man to a bappy-go-lucky vagabond, and his skill at acting, were all suggestive.

The Explorer felt an uneasiness and oppression new to him. This man was cunning and dangerous.

"The reds may shorten your life, when they see you again," suggested Golf.

"I never visit the same place twice."

"You're frank on your goods, anyhow."

"I can afford to be, for my goods are a thing of the past. Gone is my prancing mule, Cleopatra; gone that elegant keg of mahogany, or some other wood; gone the gurgling liquid that would cheer up the inward man until he thought he owned everything from the head-waters of the Saskatchewan to Pike's Peak."

Mr. Gulliver continued cheerful, even jolly; and his round face kept its bappy-go-lucky, innocent smile. Harmer and the "lumbermen" thought him a good subject for banter, and proceeded to get their fill in that respect.

But as the stranger kept up his assumed

character so well, utterly sinking his old self, Dead-Shot Paul grew less and less reconciled to his presence. Unless he erred, the man had joined them as a spy, and cunning was to be feared more than Golf Harmer's trailers.

CHAPTER XI.

NEARER TO TROUBLE.

"I SUPPOSE you have some object in coming here?"

Dave Ashmead finally put a stop to the idle talk of the moment by putting this frank question, and Eli Gulliver answered:

"Naturally, I have. I am deprived of Cleopatra's nimble legs to take me back to civilization, and of my rifle to get game. Such a man is about as helpless as a babe, and while I am a meek person, and reluctant to intrude, I would like supper and a temporary home among civilized men."

"All these you shall have, sir. Make yourself at home."

Ashmead gave the permission with an air of weariness, and then turned his attention away from Gulliver. To him the coming of the man possessed no meaning; he saw no more than a rattle-pated vagabond, and cared not what became of the "whisky trader."

The mountaineers found in the new member a subject for the banter which ignorant men like to vent upon a unique character, and they continued to improve the chance. Those who tried ridicule found Eli possessed quickness of wit superior to their own, however, and, having commanded respect by this wit, he was treated as well as he could wish, and bade fair to become a favorite with Golf's rough followers.

Supper was duly disposed of, and the men gave themselves up to rest.

Dead-Shot Paul watched his chance to speak privately with Turk Todd.

"What do you think of our new recruit?" he asked.

"Queer duck, ain't he?"

"Do you see no more than that in him?"

"Do you?" Turk replied, with a slight start.

"Listen, and judge for yourself!"

Rapidly and concisely the Explorer told of having seen the self-styled Gulliver in conversation with Mrs. Grantlee only a short time before he joined them, and the remarkable change observed in the man's manner.

Turk gave a low whistle of surprise.

"Drast it! he ain't wot he seems!"

"That's a sure statement, but what is he, really?"

"He's a feller that's here in the interests o' the Grantlees, an'— Say, ain't he the same feller who planned ter steal Rachel, an' would 'a' done so only that we got ahead o' him?"

"I firmly believe he is that man, Turk. We frustrated his plot by ourselves getting her away. He and the Grantlees are now at fault, and it is very possible that their suspicions bear heavily upon me, or us. In any case, Gulliver must feel that his chances of getting clew to Rachel's whereabouts are better here than elsewhere, or he would not have come."

"He means ter spy on us, b'gosh!"

"It looks that way."

"Drast the critter! how dares he? Why, I'll go right now an' let him see we are onter him, an' I'll wring his nose fer him, b'thunder!"

"Easy, Turk; easy! You will do nothing of the kind, for it would be suicidal. We must not let any one see, or suspect, that we are aware of his game, and we must also try to beat him. I say 'try,' for the chances are against us. If Ashmead keeps his men here, and works on the present theory that Rachel is in hiding, it seems that the cave will be found sooner or later. If we try to get the girl away, we must leave the party, and this would be likely to expose our hand."

"You ain't very encouragin'."

"Do I magnify the danger?"

"Can't say you do."

"We may as well face the facts. One thing more: Who do you think Gulliver is?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"I won't say I do, but my suspicions are strong. Remember that, when the Unknown promised Martha to steal Rachel away, he spoke of making a big disturbance as a cover for his work. What followed? Was there a disturbance?"

"Yes; but it was Over-the-Fire did it."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"You are slow of comprehension, Turk. Plainly, I suspect that Gulliver is Over-the-Fire!"

"Drast it!"

Turk felt none of the surprise which would have been his had he been free from superstition. He and Paul had often discussed Over-the-Fire, but all of the younger man's logic had not been able to convince Turk that the Fire-Slayer was as much of a man as themselves. He tried to believe, but the superstitious training of his childhood had left an indelible mark.

"I have suspected this from the beginning," Paul added. "The Unknown's demonstration came, and in the form used by Over-the-Fire. I see no chance to doubt it. Now, we have the Fire Slayer with us!"

Turk looked at Eli Gulliver and shook his head.

He doubted the statement.

The evening passed uneventfully. Paul watched closely, but failed to see anything to confirm his suspicions. The Grantlees did not go near Eli Gulliver, and gave him no more visual attention than was natural; while he seemed never to glance at them. He joked with the mountaineers all the time, and never lost his jolly good-humor.

Before the hour of retiring, Barton Grantlee fell asleep where he sat, and it was while he was in this condition that Ashmead rose and walked to the limits of the camp.

Mrs. Grantlee observed this, looked from him to her sleeping husband, hesitated, and ended by rising and going to the detective's side. He gave her a short nod which had but little of welcome.

"Have you seen or heard anything?" she asked.

"No."

"Valuable time is passing."

"We are not made of iron, madam."

"Believe me, I am finding no fault; I can see that all are very weary. You are doing well and wisely, and I thank you for your zeal."

"You are the only one who feels that way," Ashmead grumbled. "I know not whom to trust, where all seem pulling against me."

"At least, you trust me?"

Mrs. Grantlee laid her hand on the detective's arm, and there was a caress in the motion.

He looked down at her thoughtfully. He was not indifferent to womankind, and in a place where women were so scarce, this one had more attractions than she would exert where her sex was so numerous represented.

"I can hardly expect you to be false to your own cause," he returned.

"I mean, you know I sympathize with you, and appreciate your earnest work?"

"Do you, really?"

"Most certainly. You have been active from the first, and I have often been led to admire your shrewdness and far-sightedness."

Ashmead had met with all kinds of usage in his professional career, and had learned that it was not wise to be influenced by censure or praise, but the present peculiar situation, and his resentment against all the men, made him susceptible to other influences.

After all, it was pleasant to be appreciated by this soft-spoken woman. She suddenly assumed new graces in his sight. Misfortune had made him feel the need of a friend, and here was the friend, already.

"Have I really shown those qualities?" he asked.

"Most certainly."

"I did not foresee Sarah Allen's escape."

"Who could know you were to find a traitor in Paul Culver?"

"Do you actually think he got her away?"

"Who else could, or would? It was to the interest of every one else to have her kept a prisoner, but he was lukewarm from the first, and I know why. He hated me, and thought to get revenge by baffling my desires. Is not the inference plain?"

"It may be so, though—"

Ashmead looked at the manly face of the Explorer, and found it hard to credit the theory.

"Now," Mrs. Grantlee added, "I rely upon you to outwit him."

Again her hand was laid on his arm, and she looked into his face confidently.

"I trust in your wisdom, experience and shrewdness," she added. "Personally, I have no ill-will against Sarah Allen, but she did an awful deed in my house, and the blood of poor Mrs. Atherton cries from the grave for vengeance. A sacred work is given to us, and I am thankful our leader is one as sagacious and intelligent as you. This trust keeps me up when I feel like yielding to womanly weakness; I look at you and think: With such a leader we are sure to succeed!"

It never had occurred to Dave Ashmead, before, that he was quite so remarkable a man, but he did not care to combat the idea. The best of her sex like admiration, and Dave felt the better because Martha Grantlee had found such qualities in him.

Her hand remained on his arm, and he did not recoil from the touch. He drew himself up more erect and talked well; talked as a wise man should. Mrs. Grantlee professed to feel relieved, and thanked him warmly.

"Now," she observed, finally, "I'll return to the camp. It might not be wise to be seen too much with you."

So saying she hastened away, leaving him wholly in the dark as to the meaning of the last words. Why would it not be wise? Several explanations might be studied out, but he did not know which was correct.

"I have been forgetful of this lady in the rush of my chase," he thought, presently. "I wonder how she has managed to endure the hardships of this life? Really, she must be of heroic stuff!"

He watched as she settled down in camp, and noticed that she assumed a position full of grace—or so he thought.

"How did she ever happen to marry that blockhead of a Grantlee?" he mused. "I wonder— Bah! my thoughts wander!"

Walking briskly into camp he suggested that all retire at once; advice which was not disdained. Strange and inharmonious elements slept side by side that night!

CHAPTER XII.

AN ASSASSIN IN AMBUSH.

THE camp lost its quiet air at an early hour the following morning. The party rose, prepared breakfast, ate it and made ready to go out. Ashmead called the searchers together and addressed them:

"Our plan will be the same as before. Sarah Allen cannot be far away. These hills offer many places of refuge, and she is near at hand. Lacking means of flight other than her own feet, she would not be foolish enough to take to the prairie, or try to reach Worse-luck Ridge. Some recess among the rocks, near us, hides her. Go and seek there! A hundred dollars to whoever finds her!"

It was not necessary to remind the mountaineers of the financial inducement. They had not forgotten that at any time, and it was like a spur to a mettlesome horse; it urged them on to action.

They went like human bloodhounds.

Pathfinder Paul and Turk did not remain behind. They went, keeping together.

"We shall have Eli Gulliver spying on us all the while," Paul remarked. "Look! he is already edging away from Golf Harmer's men. He does it shrewdly, but we know it is so he can watch us."

"Drast him! let me find him snoopin' around an' I'll wring his head off!" fiercely asserted the honest scout. "Fact is, Pathfinder, I've held in my ugly about ez long ez I kin. Old Turk Todd never was made fer fine work, double-dealin' an' low cunnin'; an' them critters hev worried my spirit ez fer ez I kin bear."

Turk's indignation was genuine, but Paul knew that, despite his impetuous nature, he was to be relied upon thoroughly. Although he had yielded to temptation and nearly brought about a fight with Golf Harmer, he was not likely to spoil any of the finer work.

They went on and made the old pretense of doing their share of the work, but their sharpest attention was given to getting proof of their suspicion of Eli Gulliver. This they did adroitly, and no one would have detected the double watch.

For a long time nothing came of it, and further proof was had of Gulliver's shrewdness, but he had to deal with men as shrewd as himself. Presently, as they stood in a valley, Paul detected on one of the summits a shadow which had the form of a man.

If a man was there he was keeping himself concealed behind a rock, for they waited some time without developments. Then Paul, after a few words to the scout, wandered away to one side.

Using no haste he labored to get position where he could satisfy his curiosity, and with success. He saw Eli Gulliver crouching behind the rock, attentively watching Turk, in the valley.

A smile passed over the Explorer's face, and he proceeded to rejoin his ally. Eli was now fully unmasked, and his purpose in joining the party was made clear. Believing it was the two friends who had saved Rachel, he had set out to find her covert by watching them, and had joined Ashmead's band so that he might safely be among them.

"He takes us for very shallow-pated men," Paul observed, after making the report to Turk. "He may rest assured that he cannot detect us in going to the cave in the light of day."

"Dead-Shot, that feller will git us inter trouble ef we don't do him up, first. Can't we git Ashmead suspicious of him, an' hev him banished from among us?"

"There is no chance, now, for Ashmead is too suspicious of us. Wait and see what will occur later on."

Giving no more heed to Gulliver they resumed the pretense of searching, and two hours passed. Then Paul found himself separated from Turk by a little rise of land. His attention was on the ground, and his mind busy with plans for the future.

Suddenly something whistled past his head, and a shower of rocky fragments flew into his face. Then the ring of a rifle followed.

In a moment he became the alert scout who had made such a reputation in the past. He wheeled suddenly, and, not being near any covert, stood with his own rifle half-raised, his gaze sweeping keenly from point to point.

Over on a slight ridge a little wreath of smoke was rising. It betrayed the whereabouts of the marksman, though the latter was not to be seen. Not for a moment was Paul deceived as to the motive that had prompted that shot; it had been fired with murderous intent, and he believed he knew whose finger had pressed the trigger.

Boldly he faced further danger—danger which he coveted, for all he asked was one sight at the marksman. His own sobriquet of *Dead-Shot* had not been idly given.

He would have proved the fact had the man

shown even a hand, but as the minutes wore away it became evident that this would not be done. Then, making a slight detour, Paul boldly approached the assassin's cover, but not without abating that alertness which, he hoped, would give him the first shot if any more shooting was done.

But the rifleman was gone.

His ambush was plainly discernible, as was the trail which marked the line of his retreat. There, too, Paul saw where he had lain at full length and rested his rifle against a point of rock, dislodging, and, at one point, discoloring the moss upon it.

No chance shot had that been, but a deliberate attempt to kill him.

But this was not all. Footprints were there, and as, from a motive of precaution, he had taken the trouble to inform himself on that very point, he recognized them at once.

They were those of Eli Gulliver!

As Paul retraced his steps he did some thinking. This shooting episode was not in keeping with the theory that Eli wished to dog them to Rachel's hiding-place, for dead men could not be dogged thus. What, then, was the reason? It was Turk Todd who, after rejoining his friend, caught at an explanation.

"He's afeerd o' you, Pathfinder. He thought one man was enough ter dog, so he elected me fer the give-away, an' set you down ez a good subjack ter wipe out instanter. That's the idea!"

The Explorer was not prepared to dispute this logic, but one thing he did resolve upon; he would expose Gulliver before the searchers again broke camp. They had enough to attend to without risking anything from one who dealt in cowardly assassinations.

The bullet was found, but, though it had struck in very brittle, seamy rock, it was too much out of shape to be used as evidence.

It was nearing noon, and Paul and Turk went back to camp. Ezra Bemis was there already, and others came straggling in until all had arrived but Barton Grantlee, Bat Bunker and Alf Cone. Last of all they came, but not as the Explorers had hoped.

Both of the latter were looking toward the bushes when, suddenly, Grantlee appeared. Then, behind him, came others, at sight of whom Paul and Turk looked dismayed. They were Bat and Alf, and between them walked—Rachel Morey!

It was a sudden shock. All along the scouts had been aware there was danger, but the cave was so hard to find, and the chances for hiding were so good that they had trusted that the searchers would fail to locate their prey.

Now they were at hand, victorious, and what the other men thought of the situation was shown by the cheer which went up as the prisoner was led forward. Only Paul and Turk were silent, and as they marked the looked of despair which had succeeded her former composure, their sympathy for her grew stronger than ever.

Without even a word to each other they joined the circle which collected around the prisoner. She gave them one brief glance, and then looked their way no further.

"Boss," cried Bat Bunker, to Ashmead, "I claim that hundred dollars. I wuz the first ter lay hands on her!"

"He did et by a trick!" shouted Alf Cone. "He pushed me aside jest as I wuz goin' ter touch her."

"Makes no difference; the boss said the hundred went ter him who first laid hands on her, an' I did et."

"Yes, you did, you thief! but, by sin, ef you don't divvy with me you'll git my knife! I told you so at the cave, an' I mean et. Divvy or fight; that's my motto, an' we'll settle et at once, ef you say so."

So saying, Alf drew his knife, and glaring at his old crony, stood ready to try and make good his threats if Bat would also draw, but Ashmead held up an authoritative hand.

"No quarreling, men! I will satisfy you both, and there need be no hard feelings. Rest easy! Grantlee, do you come in for a share?"

"I was with them, but I want no money. I have something to speak of more important than money, be Jawvel! Ashmead, I have before now told you just what I thought of Sarah Allen's escape, but I can now give more than suspicion. I charge that man with having robbed the law of its deserved prey!"

He pointed to Dead-Shot Paul, and his voice, always of small volume, arose in a thin and unmelodious squeak, but laden with enough of feeling to betray the personal spite which actuated him.

Then Rachel gave Paul another quick glance—an imploring glance, as if she would have him understand she had not betrayed him—but she spoke no word.

"Can you prove what you assert?" Ashmead asked, his face darkening.

Grantlee threw down a bundle he had carried. The covering was an old blanket, and, inside, were a revolver and a knife.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "See the name on all of these articles! 'Paul Culver!' Is it plain enough? Do you want more evidence?"

Dead-Shot Paul was startled, for the blow had come in a way not expected. Years before the collection had been given him by a party he

had guided through the mountains, and his name had been put on each by the donors. In time all the articles were superseded in his use by superior, newer things of the same kind, and all had been put in the *cache* in the cave. When he conducted Rachel there, and opened the *cache*, he had not thought of the tell-tale markings.

Now, while their mute evidence might have proved nothing, it did prove a good deal.

Ashmead turned to the Explorer. His face was stern, but there was more than anger in it. He had known and liked the accused man, and was sorry that this day ever had come. In a subdued voice he asked:

"Paul Culver, what have you to say to this?"

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO AGAINST A CAMP.

DEAD-SHOT PAUL was ready with his reply, and he dealt in no subterfuge. He had resolved upon a straightforward course, and to the question he made answer:

"Nominally, I am guilty!"

"Nominally?" repeated Ashmead.

"Yes; in name, only. I did take the prisoner out of your hands."

"Not out of mine, sir, but out of the hands of the law; a power all honest men are bound to respect, and do respect. We are remote from any settlement, here, but the law reaches wherever the foot of man treads. He who infringes upon that law, sir, not only degrades his manhood, but makes himself subject to arrest and imprisonment."

Ashmead's manner remained subdued, but his words so stirred up honest Turk Todd that the latter muttered: "Drast it!" in a very emphatic way. Paul, however, did not allow his equanimity to be disturbed.

"Before I admit that I deserve arrest I must ask you to hear why I took the step I did. I will not bore you with details, which might have less effect upon you than they did upon me, but, without giving reasons, say that I was led to doubt if Rachel Morey was as guilty as her accusers, the Grantlees!"

Rachel flashed the speaker a grateful look, but he was giving attention only to those he mentioned. Then Van R. Barton Grantlee flushed with rage.

"Demme, sir! how dare you insinuate such a thing?" he blustered. "I've a good mind to chastise you; I have, be Jawvel!"

"Better restrain your zeal, Mr. Grantlee."

"Culver," pursued Ashmead, "you talk wildly. How can you hope to gain anything by such a quibble, such a transparent and childish attempt to save yourself?"

"Mr. Ashmead, I ask no mercy from you!" was the Explorer's reply, and his eyes flashed with anger at the intimation conveyed in the last remark. "I told you I could not, or would not, seek to explain why I first doubted Miss Morey's guilt. Let me proceed to what I know!"

"More lies!" exclaimed Grantlee, moving uneasily.

"Mister Man," spoke Turk Todd, growlingly, "ef you insinuate ag'in, that my pardner is a liar I'll jest take yer an' smash you out flat on yonder rock."

"Now they try the role of bullies!" complained Barton, quaveringly. "Will you allow it, Ashmead? Will you listen to them—"

"Oh! you're afraid to hear the truth, be you?" cried Turk, quickly.

"Mr. Grantlee, be silent. I wish to hear Paul Culver, now. Speak on, sir!"

"I will not detain you long, for I hardly expect you to believe me, anyhow. All I have to say shall be boiled down. The night you lost Miss Morey I saw, after I lay down, a certain person leave camp. Just before I had heard a signal in the woods, and I looked upon the last movement as suspicious; so I arose and followed."

"I saw the person meet a stranger, and a long conversation ensued. I crept near enough to overhear a part of it."

He looked at Martha Grantlee as he spoke, and a flush rose to that woman's face. She had good nerves, but this statement, perhaps, had not been expected.

"In what way the affairs of the two were welded I know not, but they proceeded to say that they would be in danger if Miss Morey ever was taken back for trial, and that she must not be taken back. The stranger agreed to steal her away from the sleeping camp."

"From that moment, sir, I knew my suspicions were correct, and that the prisoner was not so guilty as her accusers. I determined to defeat their attempt to steal her away, and I accomplished my object."

"Getting ahead of them, I took your prisoner away and led her to a refuge. In doing this I suppose I broke the requirements of law, but my conscience is easy."

The Explorer ceased speaking so suddenly that there was a pause before Ashmead asked:

"And who from my camp was it that met the stranger as you assert?"

"It was Mrs. Grantlee!"

Barton and his wife were ready for the occa-

sion, and they first started and assumed an appearance of utter surprise. Then Martha broke out in a shrill and vehement accusation:

"Oh! this is infamous; it is infamous! After all I have dared and suffered, must I listen to such base lies?"

"Culver, her indignation is just," asserted the detective.

"Then you don't believe me?"

"I do not."

"It is a waste of time to try and convince a stubborn man. I don't expect to do this in your case, but as you may some time know the truth, I ask you to hear me out with patience."

"Go on!"

"But I protest!" asserted Grantlee. "I could bear his base lies, but it is hard—hard, to hear my self-sacrificing wife thus insulted. I ask you to deny him further speech here. He is without decent feeling, be Jawvel!"

"Hear him out, Grantlee. Proceed, sir!"

"Next, I have reason to believe that the man whom Mrs. Grantlee secretly met is even now before us!" and he pointed to Eli Gulliver.

Thus far the mountaineers had kept silence, as they were not concerned in the quarrel, but the last statement seemed so absurd that a general laugh followed. That the vagabond could be a rescuer of anybody appeared absurd. Ashmead look bored, and waved his hand as he resignedly directed:

"Proceed sir!"

"Be that as it may, Gulliver did not enter this camp until he did have an interview with Mrs. Grantlee. I witnessed their conference. It was but a short time afterward that he appeared here, but a change had come over him that proves him a most consummate actor."

"Some time, Mr. Ashmead, you will see him when the false, jolly, ignorant, vagabond look is gone from his face. Then you will find his expression keen, alert, intelligent, commanding and forbidding. This is how he looked when I saw him with Mrs. Grantlee, first."

"More than that, Eli Gulliver has this day attempted to kill me. That he did not murder me is due to a bad shot on his part. He fired to kill!"

"Drast it, yes!" cried Turk Todd. "I kin prove that, fer I was there; I was!"

Eli Gulliver looked innocently bewildered.

"Me, shot at somebody?" he stammered.

"Yes, you!" Turk retorted.

"Good Lord! I ain't seen a gun since the blamed reds took mine, and my whisky and keg."

"You're a liar, by thunder! an' I'll walk all over yer ef you deny the truth ag'in!"

"Easy, Turk," Paul advised. "You can hardly expect him to admit his own guilt. I shall not try to prove anything. That is far from my purpose, my only wish being to duly warn Mr. Ashmead. The time is coming when he will see clearly; when he will know that Gulliver—as he calls himself—and the Grantlees are in league. When that time comes he will remember this occasion."

Paul ceased with an air which indicated he was done, and Barton Grantlees pushed to the front.

"Somebody else shall remember this occasion!" he asserted, addressing Paul with all the bluster he could assume, but wisely keeping nearer Ashmead than he was to the Explorer. "Personal abuse I could stand, but I will not allow any low fellow to insult my wife. Be Jawvel! you are a vile creature, Culver! Yes; and, when you make such a statement, you lie, sir! Demme, sir, be Jawvel you lie!"

Grantlee was getting tangled up in his own eloquence, but some one else was not in that way.

There was a panther-like leap, and then Barton lay on his back with Turk Todd kneeling on his breast.

"Take et back!" shouted the scout, in a voice like a small thunder-clap. "Take et back, or I won't answer fer yer life, you poor little snipe! Nobody kin call Dead-Shot Paul a liar without fightin' me! Take et back, I say!"

Van R. Barton was begging piteously for mercy, and Ashmead advanced.

"Let him alone, Todd! Hands off—"

"Hands off, yerself! Don't yer dare molest me in this, Dave Ashmead—no; nor no other man. I won't bear it!"

Even the bold detective hesitated before the furious glare of the big scout's eyes, and the latter transferred his grasp to his victim's throat.

"Take et back!" he reiterated.

"I will—I do!"

"You swaller all you've said, eh?"

"Yes, yes; it wasn't right to call names, and I take it back. I—I was hasty."

"That's all, varmint!"

Turk flung the fellow to one side and rose. Then the comical picture of the puny little man floundering around there in his abject fear so appealed to the scout's sense of the humorous that the battle-fire died out of his eyes, and he laughed a hearty, genial laugh.

"Lord, Lord! don't be look enough ter give a body the colic!"

He was the only one who realized the comic element in the case, and the others soon awoke

to the fact that more was to be said. Martha Grantlee again made herself heard.

"Of course," she remarked, "my husband's retraction refers only to his plain speech. The fact remains that I have been basely calumniated by Paul Culver. I trust, Mr. Ashmead, I need not say I am innocent?"

"I can't believe all I've heard."

So saying, he again turned to the Explorer.

"I did not think this of you."

"Perhaps, sir, you will tell me what you do think, now?" Paul suggested.

"I shall not undertake to analyze my own belief, at present. But the fact remains that you have confessed you took a prisoner out of the hands of officers of the law."

"I have confessed it."

"Have you considered the consequences?"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE EXILES.

THE Explorer started slightly.

"Well, what are the consequences?" he asked, after a pause.

"What do you expect?" Ashmead answered.

"You must arrest him for interfering with an officer, of course," came a voice from the rear, where Van R. Barton Grantlee had taken refuge, and it was he who thus made himself an oracle.

"Is that your plan, Mr. Ashmead?" Paul asked.

"No, sir; it is not. I confess that I am yielding to favoritism in making the decision; if you were some man I should insist upon the claims of law, and put you under arrest. But you are one who has heretofore stood well among his fellow-beings; whose name has been a synonym for honor; who has given due obedience to the laws, and thereby has had the respect of all. What are you now?"

The mingled gravity and sternness of the detective's voice was not tinged with severity, and Paul Culver felt the color rising to his face. He did not feel that he had done anything dishonorable, but the way of putting the point was not to be ignored.

"I follow you, sir," he answered, in a low voice.

"No more need be said, I think. In this matter you have been influenced by feelings which do not usually govern you, and I believe that, with this chance given you, nothing of the kind will occur again. You are free to go where you will, but, I need scarcely say, it is better we should part."

"I understand you, and will rid your camp of my undesired presence."

Very quiet was the conversation, and without any trace of ill feeling. Dead-Shot Paul appeared to yield completely to all that was said, and so he did in a measure, but he was not disposed of; he had not gone so far, and so thoroughly convinced himself that, whatever Rachel Morey might be, her enemies were bent on ruining her, out of personal motives, to withdraw now.

He turned to the prisoner.

Rachel stood with clasped hands, alternately gazing at Ashmead and Paul. There was eagerness in the regard—an eagerness to save Dead-Shot Paul, but she was helpless. She would have taken all the blame upon herself, but she could see no way of doing it. By his own confession Paul had robbed an officer of his prisoner. How could his culpability be lessened?

Helpless she was, and in despair, for keener than the pang of her own troubles was the sting of the thought that the scout had so injured his reputation for her.

Paul addressed her:

"Miss Morey, I am about to leave here, but you will please understand that I do not desert your cause. If you are ever brought to trial, I'll be there!"

She bowed; she could do no more.

"What I know ought to be told at the trial, and it shall be; that is, if no assassin shot lays me low before that time."

So saying, he turned and fixed his gaze upon Eli Gulliver, and his face grew stern and hard.

"You and I," he added, "have an account to settle, later. I have stood here on this occasion and endured severe language tamely, simply because of my consideration for Ashmead and what he represents. You, sir, I meet as man to man, and I know you to be a cowardly assassin!"

"Great peaks o' the Rockies!" cried Gulliver, with a show of bewildered dismay, "what do you mean? I ain't what you say; I ain't guilty. I'm a humble vender of pure jump-up-and-yell whisky, which I sell to red-men and white—"

"That will do! You need not lie any further. To-day, sir, you tried to shoot me dead. If you are a man, you will stand by your own work. Don't act the buffoon; don't stand there and chatter and grin like an idiot, when it is all put on. Dare you stand by your work?"

"My work is peddling prime old whisky—"

"It is false!"

For one moment Eli Gulliver lost control of himself, and his eyes glittered with fierce anger, but the mask was soon on again.

"Well, well, I give it up!" he sighed.

"Unlike you, I do not give it up! You have

tried to murder me. By all the laws of this mountain-land, I would be justified in forcing a settlement of the account here and now, but I will yield a point. Ladies and the Law are here. There shall be a postponement. But you and I are not done, Eli Gulliver. I am not a vindictive man, or a life-hunter, but he who has once tried to shoot me from ambush, may try again. You cannot have all the shooting on your side. We shall meet again, and when we do, the account shall be settled!"

Eli did not answer. He managed to hold his facial expression well, but the severe language had stirred him out of his full control. His hands worked nervously, one about the other, and his breathing was short and quick.

The will of the man was good to accept the gauntlet of battle then and there, but he managed to control himself enough to prevent a collision.

There was a long pause, and then Dead-Shot Paul addressed his comrade:

"Turk, if you will make the horses ready, we will go our way at once."

The older scout made no reply, but walked away. His mind was too full for utterance. His way was to fight for his rights in season and out, and it was hard to be branded with disgrace and, to all intents and purposes, driven out of camp. If he had been allowed his way, the superior forces of the enemy would not have prevented a gallant effort to avenge the disgrace, and to wrest Rachel again from her captors.

What was the Law when it was not justice?

Looking at matters from this rugged standpoint Turk grumbled as he prepared the horses, but, without hesitation, made the decision:

"Paul is boss lyer, an' his word ain't ter be disputed in his own affair; though I do wish he would let me lambast them drasted varmints!"

He led the horses around near the ground, and Paul joined him. They mounted. There was no leave-taking. Bestowing no attention upon the group after they were once in the saddle, the scouts put their animals in motion and rode quietly away.

They went in silence for at least one-fourth of a mile; then Turk could curb his impatience no longer.

"What be we ter do now?" he asked.

"We return to our old life."

"An' let them critters hev their way with the gal?"

"We will put our faces toward the settlements, and you may rest assured we shall be there when the trial takes place. Ashmead is a just man, as far as he can see into things, and Rachel will be well used while with him. Of that I am sure."

"But think o' the drasted things he has around him! Paul, language is weak when I think o' them, an' I can't free my mind. We know Golf Harmer and his gang of old-thieves, outcasts, sneaks an' no doubt, murderers—but I hold them above the Grantlees an' that fat cuss, Eli Gulliver. They're as much worse than the snake in Eden than he was worse than Mother Eve's canary bird, by mighty!"

"We don't differ much on that point."

"Rachel is an angel!"

"I believe her better than her accusers."

"Better? I should say so! Why, the gal never did no murder, an' I know it. Say, who did kill that Mrs. Atherton? Who, unless it was the Grantlees? They accuse Rachel, but you've heard the gang, themselves, say that she never must be took back fer trial. Did Bart Grantlee an' his wife come out here ter help ketch somebody who had killed one o' the boarders at their hotel? No, drast it! they come ter foil Ashmead's attempt ter ketch Rachel; that's what they did!"

Turk's rude speech approached eloquence, for he was very much in earnest, and words rolled off his tongue readily.

He felt like talking indefinitely, too, but did not find encouragement. To Paul Culver the break with an officer of law was no trifling matter, and he was stern and silent.

When they had gone four miles the Explorer suggested that, as they had no fixed purpose in view, they go into camp again. This was done. Turk was inclined to be sulky because he was not given chance to talk more, and he loaded his pipe to the brim, lay down, smoked, watched Paul and grumbled.

"Oh! but I'd like a chance at them snakes!" he reiterated, every few minutes. "I've got a load on my mind, an' it can't be got off without somebody's bein' licked. An' I know who needs it."

The afternoon was drawing to an end when they were interrupted. Both grew alert at the same time, and Turk tersely commented:

"Hosses!"

"Yes."

The sound of hoofs was plainly audible, and Turk rose to investigate. As he did so horses and riders became visible, emerging from a low, rocky gap but a few rods away.

"Reds!"

"Yes."

Again Paul answered briefly. Neither he nor Turk anticipated that the new event meant any-

thing of interest to them. There was no Indian outbreak at the time, and though red-men, like white men, were not always trusty, there was no reason to suppose a fight would ensue. Still, there were copper-bued men who had grudges against the scouts, and the latter did not loosen their hold on their rifles.

The discovery was mutual, and the Indians rode toward the Explorers at once. They were prosperous looking; all being well mounted and armed, and having the appearance of men who had been generously fed. Still, the experienced whites noted certain peculiarities which led Turk to say in a low tone:

"Watch out, Death-Shot! They're odds an' ends; half a dozen different tribes are represented. Watch yer boss an' gun, an' et wouldn't be amiss ter look well to yer life. Hybrids aro resky!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE NIGHT'S WILD WORK.

THE Indians advanced briskly. They bore themselves jauntily, but there were no yells, and none of the exaggerated display in which the red-man likes to indulge. A very tame and civilized party they seemed at first sight.

They drew up before the Explorers, and he who rode at the front waved his hand in a very Anglo-Saxon fashion.

"White brothers, we are glad to see you," he spoke, in very good English.

"Thank you! I hope you are in prosperity, my red friend."

"The Master of Life has given us enough to eat and drink. We do not complain."

"Will you stop with us for awhile?"

"Brother, your invitation is pleasant to our ears, and we will stop. Our business does not require haste, and Heart-that-is-Red and his warriors will gladly smoke the pipe of peace with white men who have the forms of braves. The Indian likes brave men!"

Heart-that-is-Red had slipped from the saddle. He now stood erect before the explorers, a fine specimen of manhood. He was tall and strong of build, but not heavy, resembling the panther rather than the bear; but Death-Shot Paul was satisfied that he would be no weakling in a fight. His face, too, was unusually regular of outline and feature for one of his race, and its intelligence far surpassed the average of them. In fact, there was much that aroused certain suspicions in Paul's mind.

All sat down and gave their attention to smoking.

"Whence do you come, brother?" pursued Heart-that-is-Red.

"We are last from the hills back of Mouse-tail Prairie, where we have been hunting. And you?"

From the north; from everywhere. Heart-that-is-Red loves his white brothers who take the rifle and horse and roam the prairies, but for the old women who sit down at Washington and pretend to talk for the Great Father, he has no good will. He keeps away from the Reservations, and is his own master.

"I have no blame for you. Do your followers come from your tribe?"

"Look closer, white brother. My eyes are keen enough to see you are an old hand on the plains; yours should be keen enough to see we do not all come from the same tribe. We do not pretend to, and our dress speaks for itself. These warriors are brave men who see fit to live as they like, and Heart-that-is-Red is their chief."

He spoke with an air of satisfaction, but without vain pride.

Conversation was brisk. Paul had to give the chief due attention or be uncivil, and Turk Todd, allowed a chance to speak, at last, opened the valves of his heart and the gates of his tongue, and was cordial to the minor red-men to the point of loquacity.

At the end of an hour the leader announced that they must go, and they made ready. Heart-that-is-Red shook hands with Paul and Turk at parting.

"Brothers," he remarked, "we have smoked together to-day, and my heart is warm. Our palms cross now, and it is not the way of the Indian to forget. When we meet again, let it be as friends, and if you are in need of help, call on me and it shall be given. I have given my word and it shall not be broken!"

"We thank you, chief. This has been a pleasant meeting, and we will remember our red brothers."

Pathfinder Paul did his duty well, and then the strangers mounted and rode on. The comrades watched them out of sight.

"A gallant band!" murmured Turk, drumming on the barrel of his rifle.

"True Indians, aren't they?" questioned Paul, with a sidelong glance at his comrade.

"Be they?"

"You say."

"Pathfinder, that Heart-that-is-Red is jest about as much Injun as you or me; no more."

"Good! I see your eyes are not closed. I detected the same fact, and I suspect there were one or two other white men in the party."

"Right, Dead-Shot; right!"

"Well, what do you make of them? Why

has the leader disguised himself and undertaken to act such a part? Are they out for plunder?"

"Now you hev me. I didn't see anything in his manner to show that he was on his ugly."

"Nor I. He acted civil enough, and though his professions of regard and friendship are to be taken with a grain of allowance, I don't think we need lie awake to-night, to guard against having our horses stolen. The red-men, real and fictitious, have gone their way, and I reckon we need not give them further thought."

Night was too near at hand to think of making further journey, but the scouts shifted their camp somewhat before lying down. In a gulch they passed the hours of darkness without disturbance.

The following day they rode twenty miles to the southeast, and there indulged in hunting, it being Paul's plan to give Ashmead's party a good start, and then ride on and be at hand to appear when Rachel was tried.

Another night began.

The situation of the explorers was in a wild region. The general surface was a prairie, but it was broken by ridges, hills and groups of trees. Their camp was made on a small, steep hill which was well wooded.

At nine o'clock the moon rose, and its grandeur delayed their going to rest. Although patches of thick clouds drifted across the sky, the moon was only occasionally concealed, and on other occasions shone with great brilliancy.

If it had not been for the many obstructions before noted, the scouts could have seen many miles. As it was, the scene was most interesting in its variety.

"Kind o' lulls a feller's feelin'," Turk remarked, "an' I reckon we'll sleep like a rock, ter-night."

They rolled themselves in their blankets and tested his prediction. Midnight came and passed. The explorers slept well. All nature seemed to be resting with them. Calm and peaceful was the scene.

One of the horses lifted its head, sniffed the air and whinnied slightly. The scouts moved on their blankets. Then, clear and sharp, came the report of a rifle, and both blankets were thrown off. Instinctively each man grasped his own gun, but did not stir from where he lay. Their eyes flashed glances here and there, seeking to locate the thing which had aroused them.

Both were sure it had been a rifle shot, but how near it had been, and at whom the weapon was aimed, they did not know.

But again the sound came, and they leaped up and ran to the highest point of the hill, only a few steps away. There they had the best view obtainable, while they were partially concealed by the bushes.

Turk grasped his companion's arm.

"Look! look!" he exclaimed.

He was pointing to the east, but the motion was not necessary; Paul saw as much as he. And what they saw sent the blood leaping more rapidly through their veins.

Riders were on the prairie; riders who were speeding as if life was at stake; and, certainly, it was a race. Now they disappeared behind a grove or hill; anon they came into an open space again, and the moonlight revealed them in the clearest manner. At the front rode a single figure, while all the others were in a group, a hundred rods in the rear.

But there was one thing which made the scouts gaze in interest so absorbing that they forgot to speak to each other, to explain the ideas in their minds.

The foremost rider was a woman, and all the others were pursuing her with relentless energy. At last Turk Todd aroused.

"Et's Rachel!" he cried; "et's Rachel, sure!"

He could not be sure of it at that distance, but he spoke only what was in the Pathfinder's mind. Their minds were sharper than their vision, perhaps, but they believed they could trace the outlines of her graceful figure.

"She's got away!" added the big borderman, "an' by the eternal! I won't see them drasted varmints git her ag'in! I'll—"

He brought his rifle to his shoulder, but lowered it again as he noted the distance.

"I can't do et at this range, an' ef I could, what would it signify ter drop one man? The hosses, Dead-Shot; the hosses, an' let us git away to her rescue!"

He sprung to his feet, but at that moment there was a concerted roar of rifles. Yet, not one of the pursuers had fired. Instead, it was clear they had been the targets, for one of their number reeled and fell from the saddle, while all the rest seemed thrown into a panic, and, with their faces turned toward a hill by the wayside, they pulled at their horses in an attempt to avoid danger.

But the result could not be seen by the two watchers. The girl rider had already disappeared behind, but not very close to the hill where the unknown marksmen seemed to be, and the pursuers also passed the open space and, like her, were rendered invisible.

"Get down ter business!" Turk exclaimed.

"We want a hand in that game. Come on!"

Paul was not slow to obey. They reached their horses, and, not pausing for saddles, dashed away, adjusting the bridles as they went.

"Et was Rachel, sure!" repeated Turk, excitedly.

"I suspect you're right."

"She got away—oh! she did, the darling! By the great hills, Dead-Shot, that gal is as neat as they make 'em, an' you can't keep me back no more. I'm goin' ter set myself up ez her defender, an' woe ter them who tries ter molest her when I git there."

"But the riflemen, Turk; who are they?"

"Give et up!"

"The Indians went the opposite way—"

"Oul I don't reckon et's them, but what's the odds? We're in the fight for her, and we'll tackle whatever comes our way. Whoop! only show me a hostile nose an' you'll see old Betsey vomit fire!"

The speaker waved his rifle wildly, but Paul knew him too well to fear he would use it recklessly. Ready to fight he always was, but a deadly weapon he was not prone to bring into play except in a crisis.

Sharp riding soon took them to the hill, but when they rounded the pointed side no one was to be seen. The moonlight poured down on the prairie, and as the vegetation was scant, no one could be concealed there. The hill was all in darkness, for the moon had passed the zenith.

"They've gone on," cried Turk; "but whar?"

"Necessarily, straight ahead."

"Let's be off!"

"Go, you; I'll follow."

Paul dashed down to where the rider had fallen. It did not take him long to locate the exact spot, and he made out a few drops of blood on the grass, but the man was gone. Evidently, he had not received a fatal wound.

From there, too, the trail of the party was plain, and the Explorer gave his horse the word and flashed along in pursuit.

Turk Todd was already riding like a Tam o' Shanter, and though he went by guess he had nearly the correct course.

Paul was not positive that he was proceeding properly. The route of the girl was not certain, and the mystery of the shots from the hill unsolved, but he could not see how he could stop to investigate without losing all part in the chase.

Before him and Turk was a timber-belt, and beyond that they could see other hills. How long it would be before they obtained a good view was not certain. He was close to Turk when the latter entered the timber, and soon dashed in after him.

There, it was very dark. The tree-tops were thick and interlaced, and the trunks hardly discernible.

Into this darkness he went, and for a time the world seemed shut out entirely. A few moments would have taken them through, but there was a new and startling diversion.

Fire flashed almost in Turk's face, and the report of a revolver followed; then, as if it were the signal to a group, other flashes came here, there, and all around the scouts, and bullets whistled freely.

Self-preservation is the first law of Nature, and Paul and Turk would have been less than men had they not taken that view of the matter. With the flying lead dropping leaves upon their persons they drew their own revolvers and gave back shot for shot, and more than once they believed they made touch of a target.

Suddenly, however, human forms were around them, and they were attacked hand to hand. A lithe foe leaped up behind Turk on the latter's horse and clasped him around the neck, and a sudden lurch sufficed to bring the stout scout to the ground.

He roared in rage and struck out manfully, but it seemed as if a regiment of men piled upon him. He was beaten down and rendered helpless, and before he fully realized it, was securely bound.

Then he lay panting, not so much with exhaustion as with rage, and to his ears came no sound that told of battle elsewhere. He was a prisoner, but had worse occurred in the timber?

What meant the ominous stillness?

Where was Dead-Shot Paul?

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RED RIDERS' REFUGE.

TURK was finally partially raised and dragged away a few rods, where he was lifted to a horse, bound in place, and punched a few times in the ribs, whereupon he gave his feelings vent.

"You drasted curs!" he roared; "I defy any man ter do that when my hands are free. Ef I was as much of a sneak as you be I'd go off an' shoot myself. Oh! won't you let me git a whack at yer?"

No attention was paid to his request, but he was conscious that men were mounting around him, after which the horse upon which he was an unwilling burden was led forward.

As they left the timber he distinctly saw his captors.

"Injuns!" he muttered.

Something else was of more interest than the last fact, and he looked eagerly to see if Dead-Shot Paul was alive. He saw him bound to a horse, and concluded he still survived. Then, as he realized that they had fallen into the hands of nomadic red-skins whose intentions

were uncertain, he began to use his tongue with its old freedom.

"Say, you, let me go, an' I'll give ye a bar' o' whisky an' a mile o' red cloth. I will by thunder!"

No answer was vouchsafed.

"Red brethren, you an' me ain't never had no quarrel; I know that, fer we wouldn't all be alive now; an' I don't hold no grudge fer the playful way you've trussed up my legs an' arms. But I've got an engagement I want ter keep drastedly, an' I'll give ye guns an' knives by the bushel an' crate ef you'll let a feller go. Will ye do it?"

Still he received no answer, and the red-men jogged along without any evidence of having heard.

"Drast you!" exclaimed the scout, losing his temper, "you may pretend ter be deaf, but mebbe you kin hear ef I tell yer you're a pack o' lousy red thieves. Hey?"

The horse upon which Paul was bound had moved near Turk's, and the Pathfinder warningly directed:

"Don't aggravate them, Turk!"

"Hang it! it's them who are aggravatin' me!"

"Don't make our situation worse."

"But I object ter the whole business. I've been in Injun wars, an' been cut up with bullets an' knives, an' briled fer a spring chicken at the torture-stake, but that was in time o' war, an' all in the way o' business, so never a word did I say; but this walkin' over a feller's vitals in time o' supposed peace is contemptible!"

"Turk, we've lost all trace of the girl."

"Sure!—an' that's why I've tried to bribe them, but the drasted skunks are deaf ter reason an' the clink of good old gold."

"I think it was this party who fired from the hill, and the easy way they take things here leads me to believe a portion of them may still be in pursuit."

"Think so? Wal, I hope they'll find Ashmead an' his workers in sin an' gather a robe o' scalps. That's the way I feel, by mighty!"

It was impossible to bring Turk down to a logical reasoning, and Paul tried no further.

It was not the first time he had met with trouble on the plains and mountains, and he accepted the inevitable philosophically, but he was worried about the girl rider. He would have wagered something that Rachel and Mrs. Grant-lee were the only white women within fifty or more miles, and this made him feel confident that the girl rider's identity had not been made an object of mistake.

Where was she now?

How had the chase ended?

He puzzled over these mental questions in vain, and never before had captivity been so obnoxious. After the last scene at Ashmead's camp he had begun to feel an interest in Rachel, and each grain of opposition increased that feeling.

And now, at the critical moment, he was helpless.

No heed was given to him or Turk, but the captors jogged along steadily for ten miles. Then they turned sharply away from the prairie and, for half an hour, sent their horses climbing up the range.

Morning was beginning to be seen when, at last, the captors halted in a small depression. The prisoners were unbound from the horses and deposited on the ground. Then all prepared to sleep; all but the white men.

Helpless as ever they lay where they had been placed, while their companions slept and day slowly broke.

There seemed to be a prospect of the Indians sleeping until noon, but other forces were at work. It so happened that Paul was looking toward the higher land when, suddenly, the figure of an Indian became visible against the green back-ground. He stood on a rock, and not only was he conspicuous, but his view was great.

He saw the sleeping camp, and, turning, hastened away.

The Explorer would have welcomed almost any diversion, and he hoped this would prove to be an enemy, but soon several other red-men came down the trail without secrecy; the sleepers sprang up, and all fraternized. Then the journey was finished, and the regular camp soon reached.

It was a small valley in a wild part of the range, and, perhaps, a permanent village, though only men were visible. All told, there were over twenty of them present.

Paul and Turk were thrust into a recess among the rocks and left to themselves.

"I reckon the roastin' will come next," Turk remarked. "I know I won't eat well, an' I'll holler as long as anything is left o' me."

"These men puzzle me."

"They rile me, b' thunder!"

"A village up here is not in the ordinary line of events, and I don't place them. Their refuge and their work lead me to believe they are red bushwhackers, so to speak."

"I'd forgive all else ef they'd tell me of our Rachel. Poor cherub! what misfortins may not hev overtook her. I'd give all my collat'ral ter be on the trail, safe an' sound, ter look her up."

Paul made no reply. It was a case where words seemed to be of but little use. He sat looking at their captors, and considering the chances of a turn of the tide which would favor them, when Turk gave a sudden start.

"Thunder an' rattlesnakes!" he ejaculated.

This time he was too emphatic for the Explorer to receive the exclamation with any degree of indifference. Paul looked—there was ample reason for the exclamation. Other prisoners were being led into camp, and all the faces were familiar.

They were Rachel Morey, Ashmead, Mrs. Grantlee, Bat Bunker and Alf Cone!

"Drast'em! they've got the little woman," Turk added, mournfully.

The procession came to a stop in the center of the camp, and the Indians crowded around the prisoners. No doubt the captors looked fierce and ominous, and Martha seemed on the point of fainting from fright, while Ashmead was perceptibly troubled. Rachel seemed indifferent, while Bunker and Cone retained the *sang froid* peculiar to men who led their wild life.

"Come this way an' gaze at the three-headed grizzlies!" loudly advised Bat. "Hyer we be, the only ones of our kind, an' you may never hev another chance like it. Tumble up, an' look yer fill!"

"Yes, but be durned careful how yer act," added Alf. "Don't make no cheap remarks, or I'll poke my claws out o' the cage an' tear a rib out o' yer anatomy. You hear me? Yah-whoop! Yah! yah!"

"Tarantulas an' rattlesnakes? Wah! wah!" supplemented Bunker, grimacing wilyly.

These grotesque manifestations amused the speakers, and did harm to nobody else. They were allowed to use their tongues, but were ignored. The red-men easily recognized Ashmead as the leader there, and it was to him they gave attention. He was duly questioned.

"We're all in the same boat," commented Turk, presently. "I don't see ez Boss Ashmead or Jezebel Martha is any better off than little Rachel."

"We do all meet on equal footing, now. There is no such thing as guessing what these red-skins will do. An outbreak in this decade is unusual, and their purpose correspondingly uncertain."

"I'd like to lay in with the red high-jinks an' hev him side with our folks, ag'in' Ash an' Martha."

The more Turk meditated on this plan the more he liked it, and he determined to try it.

When the new-comers had been questioned sufficiently they were put in a second recess, and the Indians settled down. The location of the two parties of prisoners was such that they had good view of each other, and Ashmead and his companions were not long in recognizing old acquaintances.

Bat and Alf celebrated the discovery by crowing loudly in imitation of a barnyard chattering, but this demonstration did not please the captors, and was promptly suppressed. The distance prevented conversation.

Paul and Turk were of the opinion that some change would soon occur, but none came. Beyond the regular furnishing of food, the day brought nothing of interest. The prisoners were kept where they had been placed. Only a few of the Indians remained in camp, but where the others had gone no one but themselves knew.

To the explorers it was a species of occupation to watch their fellow prisoners. Bat and Alf joked, told stories, and, as usual, acted like toughs. Martha kept close to Ashmead, and seemed to depend solely upon him. Rachel gave little heed to any of them, but did not appear to find her captivity any more obnoxious than that of preceding days.

Night again came.

Some of the absent warriors returned, bringing a supply of liquor, and the noble red-men drank and danced by the camp-fire. There was not enough of the beverage to render them intoxicated, but it seemed to please and enthrall them.

Later, guards were posted, and they lay down to sleep.

Captivity had grown irksome in the extreme to the explorers, but they saw no way out of it. Their bonds were firm, and not to be displaced by their own efforts.

They early imitated the example of the Indians and lay down.

They slept. Hours passed.

When Paul Culver awoke he was aware that the touch of a hand was on his arm. He looked up quickly.

"Hush!" cautioned a voice; "don't make a squeak the reds kin hear, or your name is Davy Jones!"

The center of the camp was flooded with moonlight, and it showed the forms of the sleeping braves. All was quiet there. In the recess, and where the shadow of the cliffs fell, there was darkness. Thus, Paul could not recognize the face of the speaker, but the voice was familiar.

It was Bat Bunker.

"Hold yer hosses!" the mountaineer requested, in the same secret way. "Liberty is before

yer, ef you're wise, but a kick at the dish spills the dough."

"Waste no words!" Paul promptly returned. "I partially realize the situation. Set me free, and you will find me ready to act."

"Hyer goes!"

A knife touched Dead-Shot Paul's wrists and the bonds fell away. He sprang to his feet.

"Go slow!" pursued Bat. "Hyer's fer t'other feller!"

He carefully aroused Turk, who, like Paul, was soon on his feet.

"I got out o' my strings," explained Bunker. "Et wuz a good, hard tussle, an' took all the kiver off my bones, but I'd rather lose skin than on my skull."

"And the others?" questioned the Explorer, quickly. "Are they free, also?"

"Everybody is out o' bonds, but that don't exactly mean free, yer know. We are still here, an' may not get clear, yet. Foller me, an' step like a ghost. A noise will ruin all!"

CHAPTER XVII.

RED BLOODHOUNDS.

THE caution was natural, but Bat Bunker spoke to men who had gone on too many trails to be careless with red foes lying within a few yards of them.

Without further words, and with steps that gave forth no betraying sound, Paul and Turk followed the guide. Bat led the way along the base of the cliff, where the shadows lay deepest. His course was away from the front of the camp, and the descent to the valley, but his companions silently commended his plan.

At the limits of the camp they came upon a group which was composed of Ashmead, Rachel, Martha and Alf Cone. The detective half put forward his hand to Paul, but checked the impulse.

"I'm glad you are free," he remarked, and his voice corroborated the statement.

"We are lucky."

"Excuse me, but I trust we meet as—that is, that we shall hang together?" the detective added, with some embarrassment.

"Common danger makes our interests mutual, and there is strength in numbers. We will keep together. Have you formed any plans?"

"Bunker and Cone tell me it will be impossible to get our horses, and, without them, we should be helpless on the prairie, below."

"Guards are all around the hosses," Bunker explained. "Possibly we might pass the guards, but we couldn't lead the hosses by them. See?"

"The mountaineers have another plan which meets my approval, at least," added the detective. "They know of a large cave near at hand, the entrances to which are so few and obscure that they believe the red-skins may not be aware of them. Now, the earth seems to have belched up Indians all around; why wouldn't it be our best way to take to the cave?"

"We can go there for a time, anyhow."

"Good! Cone and I have secured arms and food—enough of the latter to last our party for over a week. We have only to carry it away. Help yourselves to weapons."

This conversation took place hurriedly, and they did not delay to say more. The men equipped themselves with weapons, and the scouts were pleased to find their own among the collection. Bunker and Cone took the food and led the way.

"Turk Todd gave his arm to Rachel."

"Let me help you, little woman," he urged. "You'll find me a feller who won't go back on yer, an' I'll protect yer like a father. Step high, an' don't stub your toes out on the rocks. Poor child! you must be all wore out!"

Rachel sighed.

"I am wondering as to the limit of my endurance," she confessed.

"Cheer up!—it'll soon be over. Death-Shot an' I'll stand by yer, an' I won't hev no more nonsense from Ashmead. Look at him helpin' that woman along! Bah! they make me sick! He's as tender ter her as ef she was a Chiny doll, an' she looks up inter his face as lovin' as a tabby-cat at her kitten. Bah!"

"You do well not to trust Martha Grantlee."

"Sartain I do; of course. I kin read her like a book, an' I don't read no good."

Turk was off on his favorite hobby, and he proceeded to abuse all who were opposed to Rachel. She, however, had but little to say on the subject, and let drop no remarks which made him any the wiser.

One-fourth of a mile from the camp they entered the cave. It was an entrance so obscure that none of those unfamiliar with the place knew they had reached the destination until informed of the fact—a place where they seemed to be turning among several pillar-like rocks with prospect only of passing through, but there the entrance was.

Bunker and Cone grew exhilarated and began to sing, but Ashmead put a stop to the noise, and the mountaineers settled down to business.

They remembered that torches and fuel had been left on a previous occasion, and these they easily found. A fire was soon burning in an al-

cove, where fissures in the roof enabled the smoke to escape easily.

"The party gathered around the fire, the warmth of which was not unwelcome. Rachel sat down in her usual quiet way, at one side, and Martha took place opposite her. Mrs. Grantlee looked at her enemy with a new light in her eyes. The present situation placed them in a peculiar position which might grow embarrassing."

"The unexpected has happened with us, Mr. Culver," remarked Ashmead.

"Yes."

"Of all things I have the least expected an Indian outbreak, and my men tell me they can't realize it, even now. What do you make of it?"

"To the trained eye it is clear that they are driftwood; in other words, odds and ends from different tribes. Some one controlling mind has them in charge, though what his purpose is I can't say. I can see no object save plunder."

"They have fallen heavily on us!" exclaimed the detective, bitterly.

"Where are the rest of your party?"

"That I don't know."

"Killed?"

"I hope not, but I am in fear."

He glanced at Mrs. Grantlee and added:

"Don't let her hear any discouraging theories from us. She must be terribly worried about Grantlee, though she bears up nobly. She is a heroic woman."

Paul had his opinion of Martha, but he let the matter pass without comment.

"I will soon tell the whole story," Ashmead went on, "but I would suggest that we give first attention to our surroundings. You know better than I how to defend such a place, and I hope to have your advice and fullest aid, though you may think me full of assurance to ask it after what has occurred."

"As I said before, common danger makes our interests one. Let us forget the misunderstandings entirely, and work unitedly. I don't know just who is against us, but I feel safe in saying: We shall need every arm, every brain here, and unswerving loyalty, besides. We have discordant elements, and it rests with you and me to keep them in line."

"I'm glad to hear you talk that way, though it's a fact that I am the chief gainer by the alliance, for your border-craft is beyond price. I'll call Bunker, and we will make a reconnoissance, as it were, look at the weak points and the strong, and consider the ways of defense."

Bunker was called, and the three men went the rounds.

There were two outlets besides the main exit, but both were small, and so situated that only chance, it seemed, would reveal them to one not acquainted with the premises. Then the cave was very large, with several well-separated chambers, and, on the whole, they seemed well situated for either fighting or hiding.

Alf Cone agreed to stand guard at the entrance, and the rest of the party lay down to get further sleep. In this the men were so successful that they did not awaken until they were aroused by Alf.

"Don't be skeered," was his advice, "but it's broad daylight an' the reds are on our track. Our footprints give them partial clew ter us, an' they're in this section, but they can't track us beyond the ledges, an' they're at fault. Come an' see the beauties!"

Weapons in hand the other men followed, and he conducted them to a point just outside the entrance; a high spot where they were concealed by the pillar-like rocks, but, themselves, had a good view of the immediate vicinity.

Cone had not exaggerated; the Indians were on the move, and making sharp search for the fugitives. Thus far they had failed to get any clew beyond the ledge where the open trail ended, and they were all moving about here, there and everywhere, seeking further signs.

"Red bloodhounds!" Ashmead muttered.

"They're in your trade; huntin' human game!" quoth Turk Todd.

"At least, I am not a life-hunter."

"That's as you look at it."

The sturdy scout was indifferent to Paul's warning glance, but the detective did not seek to keep up the conversation. Silently they watched the trailers.

Several of the party drew near.

Pathfinder Paul's attention was especially drawn to one man. He was a tall, muscular brave with hawk-like features, and a general air which marked him as dangerous. He was eager in the quest, and his movements were those of the veteran trailer.

The Explorer grew uneasy as this brave approached; it seemed as if the very rocks would yield up their secrets to his glittering eyes. Nearer, nearer he came, until the scout could have cast his knife to the red-man's feet.

By that time all of the watchers were looking at him, and at him, alone. They did not retreat, for if he was to get the clew, the place for them to meet him was there. Turk looked at Paul, made a motion, received a nod in reply, and then descended slightly and, knife in hand, stood on a knee of the pillar, ready to act. If the red-man came to the mouth of the cave he was liable to be sorry for it.

He reached the pillars, but did not see anything suspicious in them. He entered the irregular group, Turk Todd stood like a statue. Which passage would the Indian take? If he turned to the left he would be face to face with the scout, with the entrance beyond.

Now the defenders could see him no longer, and they listened intently for sounds to inform them.

Which way would he go?

There was a period of suspense, and then he turned to the right. He did not even look there for footprints, as the pillars threw dark shadows. Right where he should have been the most on the alert he was the most careless, and the danger was for the time averted.

He left the pillars and passed on his way.

"A close call!" sighed Ashmead.

"Yes; 'twas the cast of a die."

"Drast the beggar!" muttered Turk, "I wish he had gone t'other way. I had jest made up my mind fer a good set-to, an' he spilt et all. Say, Pathfinder, call him back, will yer? I want some fun!"

Turk's serio-comic lament did not long attract attention, for there were other red-men to be looked to; they were still hovering near, and the defenders dared not leave their post for a moment.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ONE MAN FINDS THE CAVE.

GRADUALLY the main body of the Indians receded. The danger was not over, and would not be while their persevering natures saw any hope, but it was averted. Ashmead returned to the cave, and, later, all but Turk Todd followed him; the latter being left on guard.

As Paul and the mountaineers approached the fire they saw the detective and Martha Grantlee in conversation. One of her arms was on Ashmead's arm, and she was looking up into his face with such an air of childlike trust, real or feigned, and so much of respect and homage, if not of love, that Paul had to smile.

The scene was even more amusing to the over-practical mountain-men.

"Get on ter the play, will ye?" directed Bunker, with a laugh.

"Dead gone, ain't they? Cone returned.

"Bart Grantlee wouldn't be tickled at that sight, though he ought ter know how it's goin'."

"Yes; his wife is dead in love with old Ash."

"Or else makin' a fool o' him. Anyhow, he is gettin' mashed on her."

These blunt speeches did much to sharpen Paul Culver's wits. He had not been blind to the by-plays, present and past, and he now began to wonder seriously if there was food for the plain remarks of the mountaineers.

Ashmead left his fair companion as the trio approached, and did not show embarrassment.

"Mr. Culver," he observed, "we met yesterday under similar circumstances, as prisoners, but the chapter in our lives which went just before has not been told. I will set the example."

"I am beginning to believe this region is bewitched, not only in the good, old-fashioned way, but in a modern sense. The old-time work all hangs around this thing you call Over-the-Fire, whatever he may be."

"The night after you left us we had another visit from the fellow."

"I had intended to push on for civilization, but my horse sprained an ankle in a gully, and I concluded to rest awhile. We lay down to sleep without a thought of danger, but with one of Golf Harmer's men posted as a guard."

"Late in the night I was awakened by a big hullabaloo, and got my eyes open just in time to see Over-the-Fire, again. There was the same disturbance that attended the first appearance; the rushing fire, the red flashes, and so on, and, as before, we let the thing run its course."

"I'm ashamed to say I was too much dazed to try and settle it, then and there."

"As soon as I could get on my feet, however, I remembered Rachel Morey and made a rush for where she had been left."

"She was gone!"

"Well, I'm not accustomed to let my temper run away with me, but I reckon I did so, that time. I brought my men about me with loud shouts, and, giving the alarm, hustled them away on the trail. I looked for my guard and found him at his post, senseless. I brought him out of it, but he could tell me nothing. He vowed he had been standing erect at his last recollection, and wide awake, and that a blank had followed."

"Some of my men declared you had again released Miss Morey, but I knew better. Wherever your sympathies might be, you were not the man to deal in Over-the-Fire witchcraft."

"We did not find Rachel."

"The next day we searched for her. Baffled in trying to locate a trail, we kept up a general search, riding even after nightfall, by the light of the moon. It was then that we unexpectedly sighted her, alone, riding on the prairie."

"We pursued; she fled."

"The chase was growing hot when we were fired upon from a hill. Several of us were wounded. We swerved, raced away from the marksmen, and on after Rachel. We run plump

into a body of Indians, and they attacked us like wolves."

"There was a fight. When it was over, most of us were prisoners, but Grantlee and Eli Gulliver were among the missing. I don't know what became of them, or whether they lived through it."

"We were brought to the camp on the ridge. That is the story in brief, which tells all except Miss Morey's side. Who rescued her—she surely had help—or what became of him, I don't know."

Dead-Shot Paul told his own story, but ignored the hint he believed he had received that Ashmead would like to have him get Rachel's story. He did not intend to catechize her, or satisfy the detective's curiosity. Nevertheless she looked so lonely sitting by herself that he soon went to her side.

"I want to say to you, Miss Morey, that there is no immediate danger," he observed.

"You are very kind, Mr. Culver, but I am indifferent to the danger."

Prompt as the answer was it had no trace of rudeness, and he found his sympathies deepening.

"I hope you will see your troubles end in triumph, Miss Morey," he added, lowering his voice.

"I have had proof of your good will already, and I thank you for it. It don't matter, though."

"You are wrong; it does matter. Whatever your misfortunes are, it is your duty to feel the heroism you manifest. Do that and you will come out victor."

"I don't know," she returned, wearily. "I don't see how I am ever to set myself right with the world, for my means of doing this are lacking. If there had been no mishap—if matters had occurred as they bade fair to do, this would not be so."

She looked at vacancy, and her eyes assumed a look wherein he could read volumes dimly, yet nothing clearly. It puzzled and fascinated him.

"Don't understand me as being officious," he returned, presently, "but remember that Turk Todd and I are ready to help you, to work for you; and work will sometimes solve difficult mysteries. Remember that! Yes; you can rely upon us. Honest Turk is outspoken in his regard for you, and I am his co-worker."

"Always kind!" she murmured, and tears filled her eyes. "Providence raises me up friends where they are least expected. Do you know," she abruptly added, "I believe I owe a good turn to Over-the-Fire?"

"To Over-the-Fire?"

"Yes."

"How is that possible?"

"I only know that when, on the second night that the Fire-Slayer rushed through Ashmead's camp, a man came to me in the confusion, cut my bonds, and, without asking my leave, led me swiftly away. He conducted me nearly half a mile, and then left me, with the injunction to remain where I was."

"It was not Eli Gulliver?" demanded Paul.

"He? Certainly not."

"Describe the man!"

"He was tall and strongly formed, and of commanding presence. I could not make out his face in the darkness, but his confident air was that of one who felt the influence of power."

"And you think this was Over-the-Fire?"

"I only know that he came when the fiery machine, or what not, was speeding through the camp."

"Stranger!"

The Explorer murmured the word absently, but Rachel continued:

"I should have remained where my rescuer found me, but I suddenly found Indians around me. Discovery seemed certain, and I attempted to shift my position. I was seen. I was near their horses, and I captured one and fled. I escaped, but, finally, again fell in with Ashmead's party and was pursued by them. I presume you know the rest. The same band captured both them and me."

Dead-Shot Paul was compelled at each turn to render admiration to this young woman.

Quietly and unostentatiously she met each crisis with wonderful courage, and he felt that she deserved a better lot.

He remained in conversation with her for some time longer, taking pleasure in showing defiance to Mrs. Grantlee and Ashmead.

The latter made no effort to have Rachel regarded as his prisoner, there.

Outside, matters did not change much. The Indians evidently believed the fugitives were not far away, and they did not cease their search. Plainly, the existence of a cave was suspected, and attention was duly given to finding it. Often they came near the refuge, but the discovery was not made.

That afternoon Mrs. Grantlee sought one of her many interviews with Ashmead.

"Do you still feel hope?" she asked.

"The bordermen tell me the enemy may get discouraged and go away," he returned.

"But your own opinion?"

"I am not a borderman."

"That is just why I desire your opinion."

They are rough persons, experienced only in seeking trails and using rifles. You have practical knowledge of men and events; you are far-seeing and wise."

As usual, her complimentary words reached the mark. Sincere or deceitful they pleased the detective, and he thought them sincere. There were times when he remembered having condemned other men for trusting in woman, but he was taken at a disadvantage, now. Was not she the only one to realize his abilities?

"I will be frank enough to say that the outlook is not favorable," he made answer. "These Indians, of course, are hostile, and they mean mischief. They have stolen our horses, and without them we can't flee. Of course we may be able to get them back. In that lies our hope of escape."

"Perhaps Mr. Grantlee will be able to do something for us."

"Ye-es."

"Unless he is killed."

"Oh! I trust that is not the case!"

"If he is, I shall be alone in the world, and without any friend! I know not what I shall do!" sighed the possible widow.

"Rest easy; I will care for you—"

The detective was about to add, "until we reach the settlements and you find a refuge," but she cut him short:

"You are kind; you are very kind; and, surely, no woman could have a better protector. I confide in you and your judgment more than in that of any other person. When we get to civilization I will accept your hospitality until I see my way clear."

Ashmead was embarrassed. Here they already had Van R. Barton Grantlee killed off, and the widow, at least, was reconciled. For a moment the detective thought that he would prefer to have Grantlee alive, but he did not say so.

He made an appropriate answer, but soon excused himself and walked away.

"I don't know," he meditated, "how a bachelor is going to be guardian for a young widow—that is, when I am the bachelor—but I'll help Martha out. I deserve it, when she's sacrificed so much for my cause—and spoken so well of me."

He smiled, half in amusement and half in complacency, and went on to the entrance. But Bunker was on guard there. Ashmead remained with him for several minutes, and together they noted the movements of the Indians. The pertinacity of the latter annoyed even the old bordermen; it told that they were resolved to carry on their work.

"A fight is sure ter come!" declared Bunker.

Ashmead walked back thinking of these words and their own helplessness, and so absorbed in thought was he that he nearly collided with another man. He looked up suddenly, and then stood silent in amazement.

The man was Eli Gulliver!

CHAPTER XIX.

DARK FOREBODINGS.

GULLIVER smiled in his usual good-humored way.

"You should take warning from the philosopher who fell into the pit," he remarked, in a matter-of-fact way.

"Great heavens! how came you here?" Ashmead demanded, in astonishment.

"My legs brought me."

"But—but—"

"Any information I can give you shall be vouchsafed cheerfully," declared Eli, smiling more than ever.

"I am amazed; not so much because you have been missing and are now with us again, but to know how you got into this cave."

"Simplest thing in the world. I've been hiding from Indians since I saw you. Last night I tried to make a bolt for civilization, but when I got here, to-day, I found myself right among the reds—you want to look out for them, too. Believing it was my best way to hide, I looked for some high recess in the rocks. I found one; I crawled in; it led on and I followed. The first thing I knew I was in this place. Do you say it's a cave? Well, I saw you, got over my surprise before you saw me, at all, and here I am. How are you, old fellow?"

He grasped Ashmead's hand and shook it in his usual happy-go-lucky way.

"Well, this is surprising!" the detective asserted.

"Not at all. Stanley met Livingstone in Africa; why should I not meet you here?"

"Anyhow, you are very welcome. What of Grantlee, Bemis, Harmer and the others?"

"I don't know a thing about them. Circumstances—and the red rascals—have forced me to paddle my own canoe, and I've not seen anybody else. Who've you got in here, anyhow?"

Eli looked around with more interest.

"Dead-Shot Paul is scowling at me," he added.

"He ought to be glad to see you, now."

"He ain't. Fact is, Paul has the dyspepsia; got it the worst way. It makes him crabbed and cranky as a sore-headed bear in a cage. If I was Gabriel, and had my bugle and credentials

to prove my identity, I couldn't suit Paul Jones Othello Culver. But he ain't to blame; it's the darned dyspepsia!"

Eli's good humor was unquenched, and he looked benignly and pityingly at the Explorer, but he now had others to face. Paul, Turk and Alf Cone came forward, and suspicion was in every face.

"Hullo, monkey-tricks! how'd you get here?" demanded Alf, sourly.

"Friend Cone, I blew in," declared Eli, with his best smile.

"You'd better blow out ag'in!" retorted Turk Todd, sharply. "Say, what new devilry is afoot?"

"Is devilry so poor it has to walk?"

"Come!—no foolin', now. You can't put me off with yer grins an' idiot speeches. You'll give an account o' yerself, or go out heels over head!"

"Turk Todd!" cried Ashmead, angrily, "you will please remember, that I am master here! You—"

"Not by a drasted sight, you ain't! You may be detective, an' all that sort o' thing, but when red-skins put me on the defensive fer my life, nobody kin lord it over me. You hear me? Wal, don't give no orders here, fer they won't go down."

"We will see—"

Ashmead was white with anger, and he tugged at his revolver, but Turk's big hand closed upon his arm. The scout grew calm at this crisis, but his manner was relentless.

"Don't do et!" he advised. "Don't, fer you can't carry yer day. With reds at our door the majority rules, here, an' ef you don't like et, you kin leave."

"Yes; an' take yer sweetheart, Grantlee's wife!" added Alf Cone, with a sneer.

The shot told more than any one could have expected, and Ashmead's face grew white, but Eli Gulliver broke in, in his most cheerful manner.

"Why, what is all the rumpuss about? I don't see, but if I'm not welcome, I'll leave. Bless me! I wouldn't kick up any trouble for a ranch in Yellowstone Park."

"I think there is too much haste, here," interrupted Dead-Shot Paul. "We shall all go to destruction if our garrison is to quarrel one with another."

"This chap ain't any part of a garrison I belong ter!" stoutly declared Turk. "I want ter know how he got in. Et wasn't by the front way, an' ef 'twas by the back, et wouldn't surprise me an' artom ter see a gang o' red-skins folle him."

"Nor me," agreed Alf Cone.

It was clear that both men suspected that the dreaded invasion had begun with Eli's coming. Doubting him as they did he was looked upon as a spy, and if such a person really was within the refuge, they would be handicapped at every turn.

Dead-Shot Paul was annoyed that their ideas should have been so freely expressed, as it would have been far better to have dissembled, and to have watched Eli with a view to catching him in treachery.

Now that their words had been spoken, there was but one thing to do. There was no proof of crooked work against Eli; there was no evidence whatever that he was in collusion with the Indians, and Ashmead was his friend. Such being the case, he would not listen to the expulsion of Gulliver from the cave, even if that course had been safe.

Once more Paul took up the task of uniting the discordant elements. As well and as shrewdly as possible he smoothed over the outbreak, attributing it to a misapprehension, and Eli was led to tell his story again.

This he did in his odd way, looking into their faces and smiling the old, bland smile, and seeming wholly at ease.

Paul listened with a growing sense of the danger that went with the man if, indeed, he was meditating treachery. The man was very deep, or very shallow, and it was to be feared he was deep.

When his story was fully told, he was requested to show them where he had entered, and, after several false starts, such as an innocent man might well make, he led the way to one of the sub-entrances already known to them.

It was up in the rough face of a cliff, and though his statement that he had climbed up to get out of the way of the Indians might be true, the fact that he had found the entrance was striking and, to most of the others, oppressive.

Paul had quieted Turk and Alf, but they manifested their hostility in other ways. They scowled fiercely, but never succeeded in driving that jovial smile away from Eli's face.

The new arrival had broken up the last remnant of harmony effectually. The men stood around with gloomy faces and wondered what would come next. The numbers against him kept Ashmead in check somewhat; he had faith in Gulliver, but did not try to overwhelm him with hospitality and proofs of good will under the circumstances.

If all their party had been trustworthy, Paul and Turk, with the weight of numbers so strongly in their favor, might have felt that they could

defy the opposite faction, but no dependence was to be placed upon Cone and Bunker.

Just at present Alf's good sense led him to believe as they did, but Golf Harmer's whole band did not contain two worse specimens of mankind. Bat and Alf were ignorant, vicious, treacherous and greedy outlaws. They had hated Paul and Turk for years, and would, the explorers felt sure, now sell them out for a small sum. Their slovenly, dirty, muscular figures were a menace rather than a source of confidence, and the scouts wished them miles away.

Surely, there was but little to inspire confidence.

As he was not driven out or placed under restraint, Eli proceeded to make himself at home. He did not go near the main entrance, or pry around, but, keeping close to Ashmead, smiled and chattered constantly.

Up to this time Rachel Morey had kept close to the recess where she had been placed by the fire, but as Paul was passing near that point, anon, she suddenly came out and spoke to him.

"Are you busy?"

"No, Miss Morey."

"Then I would like to speak with you."

"With pleasure."

She cast a swift glance toward the others, and then directed:

"Step this way. It may be best not to advertise ourselves any more than possible."

Once in the darkness beyond the lighted area, she abruptly added:

"You have a new member."

"Yes; Eli Gulliver."

"Do you trust that man?"

"Frankly, I do not. He and I have not always agreed in the past, as you will remember, and it may be I am prejudiced against him, but I don't trust him. He is here, and there's no help for it, but he will be watched."

"You do well, but if you doubt and watch him, you must not be indifferent to one other."

"Who is that?"

"Martha Grantlee!"

"I believe you are right."

"I know I am, and can give the best of reasons for my opinion. She ignores him, but that is because they are both crafty. They act like strangers to each other, but it is a farce and a deceit. Do you know what Eli Gulliver is to Mrs. Grantlee?"

"No."

"He is her brother!"

Paul Culver started and looked toward the ill-favored Eli. There was nothing in his appearance to corroborate the statement, but circumstances spoke more plainly.

"Possibly you doubt me," Rachel added, "but I am sure of what I say. Looking back several years I remember having seen him in the old town, though, now, I would not recognize him. The smile he wears is a mask. I remember his face as stern and his will imperious. I confess I did not recognize him when he reappeared at Ashmead's camp, but Mrs. Grantlee's own tongue betrayed the truth. I heard her refer to him as her brother, when talking with him. Mr. Culver, if you value your life, beware of them!"

CHAPTER XX. THE FIGHT IS ON!

THE Explorer realized the importance of the revelation, and that he owed Rachel a debt of gratitude. He said as much, but another idea soon began to work in his mind.

"Miss Morey," he spoke, gravely, "I have been vainly seeking to get the facts in regard to Gulliver and Mrs. Grantlee. I now know you were better informed in regard to them than I. Is there any more you can tell?"

Rachel hesitated; then finally answered:

"Nothing that will aid you to guard against them."

"But there may come a clash when we are all beyond this cave."

"Not with you, I think."

"How about yourself? Miss Morey, I am not disposed to believe the assertions against you, but if Ashmead has his way, you will be taken back to the settlements to be tried on a serious charge. If you are not guilty, who is?"

"That I don't know, but circumstances speak clearly, as far as they go. The Grantlees allege that, on a certain night, Mrs. Atherton was slain, and her money and jewels taken by some one; that with her dying breath she declared I had done the deed. I know she never said that, so why should any one lie the charge upon me? Why, unless my accusers were, really, the guilty persons?"

"And your accusers were the Grantlees?"

"Yes."

"A bad lot!" Dead-Shot Paul commented, thoughtfully: "a bad lot!"

"I have spoken more freely to you than I ever have done to any one before. I trust you will not repeat my words?"

"Your confidence shall be respected, though I do not approve of your policy of silence. It is charged that you disappeared on the same night Mrs. Atherton was killed, and you do not deny the statement. Yet, you do not explain why you left."

"I can't do that."

"You said it was as a favor to a certain person. This was not Mrs. Atherton?"

"No."

Paul remained silent. He did not see fit to urge confidence any further. There was a pause, and then Rachel added:

"I see no hope of being able to explain, but something may occur in my behalf. I felt the death of Mrs. Atherton keenly, for we were attached to each other, and the fact of her sad end had as much to do as the unjust charge with the apathy into which I fell. Now, I am going to try and arouse from it."

"Do so, by all means. Seek to take an interest in your own affairs and in life, in general; it will be better for you. One thing more, and I will leave you: You say you think Over-the-Fire rescued you from Ashmead's camp. Are you sure your rescuer was not Eli Gulliver?"

"I am sure of that, but, of course, I have no ground for thinking it was Over-the-Fire, except that my rescue and the Fire-Slayer's demonstration went together; and the coincidence was striking enough to impress me. I do not think Over-the-Fire is anything more or less than a man."

"None but the superstitious take a contrary view. I will go now—"

He paused, looked toward the opposite limit of the circle of light, and added:

"Mrs. Grantlee and Ashmead are having one of their soulful communions."

"She is bound to have him in her power."

"Why?"

"To influence him against me."

Rachel could give no reason for this belief, and as he walked away it occurred to Paul that, while she undoubtedly was working to that end, there might be more in it. Mrs. Grantlee was fickle and unscrupulous. She seemed really to admire the detective. Perhaps she contemplated throwing her husband over for a new admirer.

At this juncture Bat Bunker came back hurriedly from the entrance.

"I reckon you'd better go thar," he added.

"Me an' Turk Todd figger et up that an attack is coming. We ain't seen no reds near the mouth o' this den, but thar is work goin' on that we don't understand, unless et does mean an attack."

The alarm was sufficient to draw Paul and Ashmead, and they, with Bunker, joined Turk and Alf Cone. Both these men were at the lookout, and their faces were those of men prepared for battle. Ashmead asked for particulars, but Turk pointed and simply said:

"Watch 'em!"

Silently the direction was obeyed. To Paul Culver there was much that had a voice of its own. The Indians were no longer seeking for trails, nor was the old restlessness visible. They were in a group, and many of them were listening to one man who was addressing them. The others were looking to their weapons, and in a way very suggestive to an old borderer.

"What d'ye make of it?" Bunker finally asked.

"Action of some kind is contemplated, and I cannot doubt it is in the way of battle, or, at least, attack on some enemy, or set of victims," Paul returned.

"They've been p'intin' this way."

"Perhaps some man has been found among them who knows of the cave, and they are shrewd enough to suspect we are here."

The Dead-Shot thought of Eli Gulliver with fresh suspicion. The change had followed very soon after his arrival.

The red orator ended his address and the group broke up, but its members were still held by one purpose. The leader set his face toward the cave, and all the others followed, every man being fully armed.

"Et's comin'!" exclaimed Turk Todd.

The prophecy grew more reasonable as the moments passed. The foremost Indian led to a point ominously near the fugitives, and then turned and made a gesture. At that wave of his hand the braves broke away like rattlesnakes seeking their dens. Each man made for a rock, or chasm, or hollow, and they sunk out of sight as if by magic—all but the leader. He remained in place, erect and alert. He waited only until his men were concealed, however, and then walked forward with firm steps.

"Summons ter surrender!" commented Turk.

It was to be nothing less. Without giving evidence that his present journey was anything but of the most trivial kind, or that he had the least interest in his surroundings, he advanced until within easy pistol-shot of the fugitives. They, keeping themselves concealed as before, awaited developments.

The Indian paused and, raising his voice but slightly, spoke:

"White men, I would have speech with you!"

No one answered.

"I ask you not to deceive yourselves," he went on, presently. "The red-man knows where you are. Some of you are experienced in the ways of the war-path, and to such I need say but little. I ask you to believe me when I say I know you are there, for I would talk with you. Speak out!"

He was not obeyed; no one "spoke out."

"I come from Eagle-of-the-Crags, the chief of this band, whose name is famous wherever red-men go; whose hand is heavy in war; whose head is long in council, and who is a terror to his foes. Listen to me, that you may not arouse the anger of Eagle-of-the-Crags. Who speaks?"

"Not us, by a drasted sight!" muttered Turk Todd.

There was a considerable pause, and impatience marked the voice of the Indian as he finally proceeded.

"Eagle-of-the-Crags is chief of all this region. To the south lay the towns of the white men, and he troubled them not. He and his young men have kept away from the pale-face country. Here, where the foot-hills of the great range meet the wide prairies of the north, Eagle-of-the-Crags has taken his stand. This is his country. Now he asks of the white men what he has given them—that each shall keep away from the other's domain. You, pale-faces, are on the Eagle's land. He asks you to go. Will you obey? Who speaks?"

"You seem ter be doin' yer share of it!" muttered Turk.

"A great warrior is Eagle-of-the-Crags," pursued the orator, "but he loves his white brothers and would not do them any harm. He now bids them go in peace. If they do that, all will be well, but go they must. If they refuse, the young men of the tribe shall be set upon the invaders, and all shall be wiped out of existence. Is it not better you should go in peace? Who speaks?"

"Et may be a two-legged donkey," remarked Turk.

"His ears jest fit," put in Bunker.

"An' so does his bray," added Cone.

Ashmead was worried, and he wondered how the men could just so lightly at such a time. To him there was something terribly ominous in all this.

The orator again waited in vain for a reply.

"You think to deceive me by silence," he went on; "you think I will believe you are not there; but it cannot be. I know what I speak of, and I will prove it. Look! this is my faith in the white men!"

Quickly he laid all of his visible weapons down, and then advanced with long, bold steps. He was among the pillars in a moment, and the fugitives looked hurriedly one to the other in alarm.

"Let us retreat to the cave!" Ashmead urged.

"And let him see the weak points of the place? No; we must meet him here. Let him come! Keep your places!"

So spoke Death-Shot Paul. The crisis came quickly. The Indian turned the corner of a pillar and, on the shelf-like projections of another shaft, saw the defenders irregularly arranged, like so many statues. But these statues were of life, and every hand held a weapon.

The red-man paused, folded his arms and looked at them composedly.

"I have come for my answer," he remarked, calmly.

"Suppose we give it with powder and ball?" retorted the Death-Shot.

"I am unarmed!"

"Well, you have put us on our honor without our consent, but I suppose you can rely upon us. Still, Indian, we have no friendly feeling for you. Remember, you have avowed your purpose to proceed to hostilities if we do not obey. I ask you, why should we obey? Why should we desert land where we claim equal rights with you?"

"Because it is the will of Eagle-of-the-Crags."

"And who is Eagle-of-the-Crags?"

CHAPTER XXI.

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT.

The red orator braced himself for another effort.

"Eagle-of-the-Crags is the chief of all this region. He rules with no one to dispute him. He says to his young men, Go! and they go; he says, Come! and they come. And when he tells the white men they cannot stay in his country, his word is law to them, too."

"This does not explain who he is," Paul answered, "and I never heard of him before, but we will let it pass. There are exceptions to every rule, and this is a case where the exception comes in, I think. We will leave this country in good time, but not now. We are satisfied where we are. We will stay right here!"

"Think once more."

"It isn't necessary."

"If you refuse to go, the red-men will attack you at once."

"We don't aspire to have trouble with them, but if they are greedy for fight, let them come. We have fought your race before, and our garrison is now strong enough to beat off all the Indians in Montana."

This little fiction did not seem to make any impression on the orator.

"My young men will be very angry when I return with this answer."

"Tell them to hold in their wrath all they can, for it will do no good."

"And this is your final answer?"

"Yea."

"I will return to the red warriors, but when

the bullets begin to fly, remember I warned you."

Waving his hand the chief turned and walked away. He did not once look back, and no hastening of his dignified steps indicated any perturbation at having an armed enemy at his back.

He went to where his own weapons had been left, recovered them, and then disappeared behind a rock.

"Fun begins!" quoth Turk Todd.

Then Bat Bunker rather startled his companions by vociferously crowing in imitation of a chanticler, and Alf Cone followed with the barking of a dog, artistically done; after which both let themselves loose and the howling of the wolf, the scream of the panther, the cawing of the raven and the braying of the mule rent the air and gave out the impression that a whole menagerie was awakening to life.

"Thunder an' great guns! what will ye do next?" muttered Turk, in disgust.

"We've got ter let off our animal spirits, old man."

"You've done it ter the life, especially when you brayed like a donkey!"

Turk's blunt tongue seemed fated always to stir up strife, and Bunker and Cone looked anything but pleased, but Dead-Shot Paul averted a possible quarrel by ordering all to leave the pillar and prepare for fighting. The attack might come at once, and it might not, but the pillars before the entrance would impede the advance of an attacking party and furnish cover from which half a dozen good men could make a great defense.

They waited, but the minutes rolled away without any demonstration. An hour passed. Now and then one of the defenders ascended the pillar to get a view, but the closest watch failed to discover an Indian. They had gone from sight as completely as if spirited a hundred miles away. This, however, did not put the besieged off their guard. They knew the enemy was near, and, hovering around the entrance, liable to make an attack at any time.

The sub-entrances were a source of constant dread to the little band. They could not set guards there, for their force was too weak already, and they could not close them so as to prevent ingress.

Yet, if discovered by the Indians, the whole party could enter there and have the defenders at their mercy.

In this state of painful uncertainty the day passed. There had been no attack, but they were sure it would be different at night. Surely, that period would not pass without a strong effort from the enemy.

Dead-Shot Paul met Ashmead by the fire and stopped him.

"I want to lay a new plan before you," he stated; "one which Turk and I have been considering."

"I shall be only too glad to hear anything that holds out a grain of hope," Ashmead fervently replied.

"How about deserting the cave?"

The boldness of the proposition startled the detective.

"Where would we go?"

"The way is wide enough, as it embraces the whole West. The question is, can we get through the Indians' lines? The small exits show us the way out. Shall we go?"

The Explorer leaned upon his rifle and awaited the reply. His own views had been embodied in the proposition, but Ashmead was bewildered.

"It seems like giving up our last hope."

"Can you see much hope, here?"

"There would be if it were not for the sub-entrances," he answered.

"That's the point exactly; there lies the danger. Eli Gulliver found one of them. Why should not others find them?—even if Eli is not disposed to betray us?"

"I'll answer for him."

"You do more than I would, but let that pass. I tell you frankly that I think our only hope is to leave here quickly and try to get through secretly. It would be familiar work for the bordermen in the party, though, of course, full of doubt and danger. But to stay here seems worse. Again, speaking frankly, I think the Indians are bound to overrun this cave within a few hours. They may do it by entering at the rear, or by slaughtering all of us at the main entrance."

The calm, straightforward manner of the speaker sent a chill to Ashmead's heart. He was not a coward, but this work was not in the line of his experience.

He looked at Mrs. Grantlee and, after a pause, replied:

"I will consult with the non-combatants, and let you know my decision later. It would be asking much of them—of Mrs. Grantlee, to expect her to creep through the lines of the red fiends. A delicate woman would be out of place there, but I will consult her."

"Pardon me, Mr. Ashmead, but I object!"

"Object?"

"Decidedly!"

"And why, sir?"

"Because, under any condition, it would not be wise in such a strangely-assorted company as

this to blazon our plans to the four winds; and in the present case, Mrs. Grantlee is not above suspicion."

The detective's face flushed.

"Suspicion, sir? Suspicion of a devoted, heroic, self-sacrificing woman? I am surprised at you, Paul Culver; the words are unworthy of you!"

"I know your opinion of her, and acknowledge your right to think as you please. I claim the same privilege. Alone, she might not do much damage if she wished to, but what about Eli Gulliver?"

"You still insist that they are in league, do you? You weary me, Culver! It is preposterous! Even if Mrs. Grantlee was the kind of a woman you think her to be, she would not seek an ally in Gulliver."

"Suppose you were told he was her brother?"

"Her brother? Absurd!"

"We are forgetting the point at issue to discuss another upon which we are certain not to agree. I will leave it, only remarking that the riddles of the present often are to be solved by the developments of the future. To return to business, I must insist that the non-combatants, including Eli Gulliver, shall not be told of any plans we consider."

Not for a moment had Paul's manner been anything but patient and quiet, but in the last declaration there was a firmness which Ashmead did not see fit to defy.

He remembered that even Bunker and Cone were against him, and realized that he must not be stubborn.

"Have your own way," he answered. "You may be right."

"Shall we, then, desert the cave?"

It was a vital question, and hard to solve, but Paul carefully explained the respective hopes and dangers of going and staying, and Ashmead ended by giving his voice in favor of flight. It was not as if a general Indian war was on; the redoubtable Eagle-of-the-Crags, whoever he might be, was not known to fame. He was no more than the leader of a marauding band, the scum of several tribes; and was not likely to have a large force at his command.

Once get the start of them, with good horses, and there was no visible reason why the escape should not be made good.

The venture was fully decided upon, and once more, when urged to the point, Ashmead promised not to speak of the plan to Mrs. Grantlee or Gulliver.

This point settled, the Explorer went back to where Turk Todd and Bat Bunker were keeping watch. The scene at the main entrance had not changed. The enemy had made no hostile demonstration, and the keenest watch of trained eyes had failed to discover even a solitary red-man.

"Drast et! I b'lieve somethin' is up!" declared Turk.

"That's a scheme at work, sure," Bunker agreed. "Ef we don't beat 'em at their own game, we won't never see many more suns set."

"They wouldn't be quite so mum ef they hadn't a scheme in mind."

"I only hope that ain't a traitor inside."

Dead-Shot Paul did not see fit to add to his companions' apprehensions, but quietly informed them that Ashmead had agreed to the plan of deserting the cave. This pleased both, for they had lost all faith in the place, and they grew cheerful under the prospect of resolute action.

The Explorer turned to retrace his steps, but before he reached the fire he was met by Rachel. She was moving rapidly, and her manner lacked the old composure.

"I have seen an Indian in the cave!" she exclaimed.

"What?"

"I surely have seen an Indian!"

Paul stood dismayed.

"More than that, Eli Gulliver was with him!"

The inference was beyond doubt, and Paul grasped his rifle more firmly, and, his eyes gleaming with a settled purpose, took several steps forward. Then he suddenly paused.

"Tell me all!" he directed, in a low, tense voice.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PRESENCE OF DEADLY DANGER.

RACHEL replied:

"Unfortunately, I can tell but little. I had been near the fire, but I caught the fever of suspense which seemed to be on every one else, and found it hard to keep still. I arose and walked toward the interior of the cave."

"Unconsciously, I directed my steps toward one of the minor entrances. I did not realize this fact until I caught the gleam of daylight. My first idea was to go on and get a secret look at the outside world, but recollection of the danger I might incur led me to pause."

"I was about to turn back when I heard footsteps beyond me, nearer the light."

"Looking thence I saw two men come from a side-passage, and I gave a start as I perceived that one was an Indian. I was about to flee, believing the whole band had entered the cave, but then perceived that the second man was of white skin."

"It was Eli Gulliver!

"They paused for a moment in conversation, and it was Gulliver who did nearly all the talking. Plainly, he was giving orders, or directions. He motioned alternately toward the entrance and in this direction, and the Indian nodded his head to indicate he understood.

"Finally they parted, and the Indian walked away toward the entrance. Gulliver turned back. Then I thought it was time for me to act, and I hurried this way to tell you what had happened."

This straightforward statement carried conviction with every word, and Dead-Shot Paul answered:

"Miss Morey, you have done nobly, and I won't forget this service. You may have been the means of saving our whole party. Anyhow, you have given proof of Gulliver's treachery, and I know how to act. More than that, I shall act at once!"

With long steps he continued on to the fire. Three persons were there. Ashmead and Mrs. Grantlee were enjoying one of their "soulful occasions," and talking as placidly as if danger was a thing unknown. Near them, but far enough away not to be a listener, Eli Gulliver was amusing himself by tossing a pebble against the wall and catching it on the rebound—an occupation over which he smiled gleefully.

Alf Cone advanced from the darkness.

"So our man is there," he commented, looking at Eli. "I ain't been keeping good watch, I confess. Fact is, I fell asleep. But no harm ain't done, I reckon."

"Alf," Paul responded, "follow me, listen to me, and you shall be enlightened."

The Explorer marched into the circle of light and touched Gulliver with his rifle.

"Get up!" he ordered.

"Oh! I'm all right, here," answered Eli, his smile growing broader.

"Cone, take yonder lasso and bind his hands and feet!"

"What?"

Eli dropped the pebble and looked up. The smile vanished from his face, and his true nature flashed out. The half-idiotic look was gone; keen intelligence flashed from the face, and it was moreover, a face of sternness and power. The mask was off.

"You are a prisoner!" Paul announced, coolly.

The chubby hands of the suspected man clinched until the nails sunk deep in the flesh. His every nerve seemed aquiver for the moment. Then the struggle was over in his mind and he was the Gulliver of old. He smiled into the Explorer's face.

"You will have your joke, Mr. Culver," he remarked, cheerfully.

"You can regard the matter as a joke if you wish, but, I repeat, *you are a prisoner!* Alf, bind him!"

"Sart'in sure, by thunder!" the mountaineer agreed, and caught up the lasso.

But Ashmead, recovering from his amazement, interposed.

"What do you mean, Culver?" he demanded.

"Simply that I am going to wing a traitor."

"So you return to your old song! Hang it! I did think you had more sense. You weary me!"

"If so, you will have to rest in weariness, for your friend and *protege* has run his course. I am going to tie him up, hand and foot!"

"Who appointed you leader here?" Ashmead blustered. "I remonstrated! I protest emphatically! More than that, I won't stand idle and see this outrage done. Your spite against poor Gulliver is groundless, or at the best, founded on mere jealousy. I won't endure it sir! Cone, I forbid you to act; Gulliver shall not be bound!"

Ashmead had taken the decisive step, and he confronted Paul with angry face and resolute manner. Every word he spoke worked his feelings up more and more, and he was fast growing furious.

The Pathfinder was never calmer.

"Do you know my reasons for the step?"

"Reasons? You are deaf to reason!"

"You shall hear. An Indian has been in this cave, and Gulliver has been in friendly conversation with him."

"Who says so?"

"The witness was Rachel Morey—"

"Ha! and do you take her word?—the word of a murderess?"

"Her guilt has not been proven; that of *your* favorite has!"

He pointed to Eli as he spoke. That person was fully in command of himself again, and he began to grin and utter his usual vapid speeches, but the other men were too much in earnest to heed him, and he did not insist upon being heard.

"I deny it, sir; I deny it!" Ashmead shouted. "This thing has gone far enough, and you have carried the high hand too long, already. It must be stopped. If it isn't, there is no knowing whom you will jump on next. It may be me; there's no limit to a man's madness when common sense deserts him. This must stop, sir!"

"Mr. Ashmead, I doubt if a more heterogeneous collection of persons of one nationality were ever gotten together than we have had here.

Not only is each person almost wholly different from his fellows in character, but in relation to existing circumstances there was no end to factions. But for this, but for the fact that it was hard to form a party whose interests were, and would be, one, and who could be relied upon to stand by a fixed rule of conduct, this crisis would have come before, even if you were the nominal leader. Now, that fact will avail nothing. Gulliver is a traitor, and shall be dealt with as such."

"You will bind him?"

"Yes."

"In defiance of my wishes?"

"Yes."

"Beware what you do!"

"Every man here is with me but you. Listen to the evidence!"

He began to tell the story as he had heard it from Rachel, but when he told how Eli had been seen with the Indian, the accused man broke out in protestations of innocence so rapid as to be incoherent. His smile was gone, but not the mask of ignorance.

Ashmead was not convinced. Mrs. Grantlee had just been saying a good word for Gulliver, and it enraged the detective to have the man he was defending so stubbornly and blindly condemned on the word of a woman he was struggling against manifold difficulties to take to a court of law.

"It seems to be the disposition of certain persons here to make all the trouble they can," he remarked, bitterly.

"I have observed that fact."

"Meaning me?"

"You will see you are opposed to every one else. Comments are unnecessary."

"Well, I am going to make comments, for one, and, what's more, I am going to stand by this inoffensive man. I forbid any one laying a hand on him. I am an officer of the law, and my authority reaches even here. I shall defend Gulliver! He shall not be put under restraint!"

Doggedly Ashmead gave his ultimatum, and he stood up to make good his words, ugly and resolute. There was a brief silence. Dead-Shot Paul looked at him in wonder. Dave Ashmead always had borne a good reputation; no one had questioned his honesty, and his sagacity had been much quoted.

Now, he had leveled his own reputation, and the cause was transparent. Only the influence of a scheming woman could have made him so blind to the demands of prudence and reason. He was Mrs. Grantlee's slave.

A clash seemed inevitable, for Paul was equally determined, and Alf Cone was getting into a fury of impatience, but the point was settled in an unexpected manner.

Smiling his sunniest smile, Eli Gulliver came to the front.

"Gents," he spoke, without a trace of ill-feeling, "let us have no trouble over this. There is a mistake somewhere, for I have not seen any Indian in the cave, nor would I deal with those rude, rough men, but I know all is meant for the best. Let us be at peace! Tie me up!"

"Tie you up?" echoed Ashmead.

"Yes."

"But you don't know what you say."

"Oh! yes, good sir; it's all right."

"But the indignity—"

"I can bear it!"

"And if the Indians really come you will be wholly helpless; you cannot defend yourself with your hands and ankles tied."

"Then I will rely upon these good gentlemen to defend me. Anyhow, I am opposed to having words over it, for I never feel happy in a quarrel. I wish to oblige people when I can. Here are my hands, Mr. Cone!"

Without any trace of ill-feeling Eli put out the members referred to. Alf was dazed for a moment by this ready compliance, but quickly recovered and began to put on the bonds.

"I'm like you," he growled, with grim humor; "I like to oblige people, an' I won't disappoint you; wouldn't do it fer a ranchful o' bosses. I reseparatorate yer good wishes, Mr. Gull! One more turn—like that! Ef I ain't gettin' them tight enough, say so!"

There was sarcasm in the last words, as well as in the first, for he was unnecessarily harsh. He jerked at the cords and pulled them tight until his rough work could not but give pain to his victim, but Eli bore it without flinching, and without visible signs of anger.

It was not Paul Culver's wish to have his agents turn torturers, and he now interfered, loosened the bonds somewhat, and saw they were properly adjusted.

Ashmead stood by in silence, but, even when Eli disarmed him of opposition by submitting so freely, he was not satisfied. His expression was dark and threatening, and each turn of the cords seemed to give more pain to him than to Gulliver.

Perhaps a glance from Mrs. Grantlee, who was taking everything quite calmly, had something to do with his subsidence, but when Eli finally was secured, he added:

"As long as Mr. Gulliver don't object I will yield a point to you, but you have not heard the last of this."

"What do you mean?" Paul asked, quietly.

"When we reach the settlements I shall proceed against you, legally."

"Very well; I will meet the issue, unless one of us changes his mind in the meanwhile."

One point was settled, but Paul was not certain that Ashmead would not release Eli. With so small a force a guard could not be kept over him, and though they intended to watch as far as was possible, the detective had a chance to defy them and free Eli, if Eli would be freed.

The Explorer called Alf Cone aside.

CHAPTER XXIII.

STRANGELY MISSING.

"THE next thing that demands our attention," said Dead-Shot Paul, "is to learn if the cave is free of Indians. The fact that one has been here is suggestive of the possibility that a score may now be in the cave."

"Fact, by mighty!" Alf agreed.

"It is for you and me to make the search. I dare not weaken our force at the main entrance. Turk and Bunker are hard fighters, but even two such men make a force all too small. They must remain. Do you get two good torches from the supply in the recess, while I go to notify Turk and Bat. Then we'll make the search."

"But Ashmead will let Gully free."

"I think not, at present. Anyhow, we must run the risk."

Cone was reluctant to have it so, but, as he could see no other way, he yielded. In a few minutes they were ready for the search.

"Ef I ever see a man who's bewitched, it's that Ashmead," Alf declared, in disgust. "Here he is, a man who has been a leader, an' now that we are all liable ter git our ha'r lifted ter-night, he sets there an' smiles sweet on Grantlee's wife, never doin' a thing ter help the defense. Is the man crazy?"

"He is ugly; that's all. Angry at being deprived of authority, and by not having his views made our law, he is sulking. Pray heaven he does no worse!"

As they went into the interior the speaker cast a look backward. There sat the misguided detective at his case, while the other men were trying to protect themselves from deadly danger. The situation was horribly mixed.

While he looked, however, Ashmead rose and walked toward the entrance.

Paul and Alf went on. It was a matter of great difficulty to satisfy themselves conclusively that no one was hiding in the cave. The place was large, with branches of all sizes, and no ordinary effort would determine fully that men were not secreted in the smaller recesses, it seemed.

First of all the searchers went to the minor entrance near which Rachel had seen the Indian. They dared not go to the outlet, as the light of their torches would be liable to do great damage, but, inside, they searched carefully for footprints.

None were found, but that was not surprising; their own feet left no perceptible mark. Next they made the search in detail, and consumed considerable time without making discoveries. If any one was concealed there, the fact was not established.

This done, they left the torches and went in the dark to the outlet. It was half-way up a cliff. The latter was rough and ragged, with numerous clefts and projections. It could easily be climbed, but unless the besiegers knew of it, there seemed no good reason why they should take the trouble.

It was in that way, however, that Eli Gulliver had entered.

"Mighty queer he did it!" commented Alf, suspiciously. "He's a greenhorn—or pretends ter be—an' I s'pose sech are liable ter climb up the face of a cliff ter look fer a hidin'-place, but I never would hev any such luck ez he did. Ef he's square, his luck is amazin'."

"I feel that we can rely upon what Miss Morey said about the Indian, and, if so, we may as well decide conclusively that he knew of this entrance and came in deliberately. More than that, the besiegers all know of it, and could have entered when he did."

"Then why didn't they?"

"Because the traitors in our party want to blind Dave Ashmead and keep in his good graces. A rash step might arouse his suspicions, infatuated as he is. Now, Martha Grantlee is a long-headed schemer, but I believe she is only a subordinate. It is Eli Gulliver, as he calls himself—or her brother, as I believe him to be—who is the brains of the whole work. He plans, and what he orders, she does. He's a long-headed fellow."

"I'd like ter see his neck lengthened with a rope."

For awhile Paul stood and looked at the surrounding scenery, or, rather, the darkness which nearly made it invisible. The moon was not up, and but little was to be seen. Still, he tried to assure himself that no human figures were skulking below.

"It seems suicidal to leave this entrance unguarded," he remarked, at last, "but I don't see how we can help it. Divide our party further and we can defend no point. Let us go back!"

Although he gave this advice the Explorer did

not follow the example set by Alf. He stood in deep thought, while Alf, again pausing, looked at him inquiringly.

"I am tempted to hazard a trip outside," Paul presently added. "Had our force been larger I should have done that as soon as night fell, but I have feared an attack might come while I was away. Now, the impression grows upon me that this precaution, which would be imperatively necessary under other circumstances, should be risked even now."

"You kin find whar the reds be, sure?"

"Yes."

"Why not go?"

"I think I will. Do you remain here, Alf, and watch and listen both within and without. I won't be gone long."

This decision arrived at he moved quickly. Leaving his rifle he descended the cliff quietly but expeditiously. First of all, when on the ground, he undertook to learn if any one was near the minor entrance, but though he searched carefully, he found no sign.

When this was done he moved to the north, toward the point where the besiegers had last been seen. The undertaking now became of a nature no novice could risk, but it was old work for him. He crept from rock to rock, from bush to bush, gradually approaching the main entrance.

At that point he was not disappointed.

He soon discovered Indians, and in just the position they naturally would be if they were carrying on a genuine siege, and ignorant of all entrances but that before them.

For awhile the Dead-Shot was puzzled, but this did not last long. He gave Eli Gulliver credit for great shrewdness. If Eli was in alliance with the Indians, and plotting as Paul suspected, would he not be cunning enough to suspect that a scout might go out from the cave, and to arrange things with the besiegers so that all would look right and plausible?

"My belief is not shaken!" the scout muttered.

He moved around somewhat longer. The Indians were in place as if they intended an attack, but very quiet, and he found no chance to listen to any conversation.

He returned to the cave convinced that the plan of deserting the place was the best of all. Alf Cone met him at the hole in the cliff, and they went back to their companions. Mrs. Grantlee and Gulliver, alone, were by the fire. Paul went on to the main entrance and found Turk, Bat and Ashmead there.

He made his report, adding:

"We will get off without delay. If not molested there is a chance to secure horses outside, as I have satisfied myself; and we will not wait to be attacked. You, Turk and Bunker, had better remain here until the last moment. The rest of us will get our few belongings together. We start in ten minutes."

He went a few steps, looked at Ashmead, and added:

"Will you go with me?"

"I may as well."

The detective answered stiffly, but readily enough, and they went together. Paul made a few remarks on the situation as they walked, but neither ventured on delicate ground. Reaching the fire, Paul and Alf proceeded to put the blankets and other movable articles into shape.

"Where is Rachel Morey?" Ashmead asked, suddenly.

"No one answered."

"Do you know, Culver?"

"No."

"She left here some time ago, and walked toward the interior of the cave," explained Mrs. Grantlee.

"She must be found!"

The detective caught up a brand from the fire and moved away with quick steps. Dead-Shot Paul's work was done, and he stood in irresolution. Rachel's absence at that time impressed him as being peculiar. Alf called his attention to some point, and they were busy over it for several minutes. Just as they finished Ashmead came back with long steps.

"Culver, what have you done with the Morey woman?" he demanded, sharply.

"I? Nothing!"

"Then where is she?"

"I don't know. Didn't you find her?"

"No; she isn't in the cave!"

This announcement fell upon the Dead-Shot's ears with singular force. Rachel missing? How could that be? Why should she be absent when she knew her best friends, Turk and himself, were there? Again suspicion came to him. His absence, and the presence of Alf Cone, Turk and Bunker at the entrances, had left the cave, itself, a field for free action. Had Ashmead embraced the chance to steal a march on those who opposed him?

He looked into the detective's face with suspicion, and received a return look so full of anger, real or feigned, that it amounted to fury.

"By the Lord, sir!" Ashmead shouted, "you have stolen my prisoner!"

"I have stolen her?"

"Yes, you!"

The detective shouted as if he were talking to

a deaf man, and ended by shaking his fist at Paul and almost foaming with rage.

"I know you, at last; I know you, sir! You have been working against me from the first; you have done your best to frustrate the demands of law and save a murderess from justice; you have lied to shield yourself and lied to injure others; you have made a pretense of high moral action when your soul was black with sin; but I know you, at last! You have stolen my prisoner from me!"

Quickly, yet in an even tone, came Paul's reply:

"You say it well, Ashmead, but your charge is only a shield to your own guilt. It is *you* who have spirited her away."

"You talk like an idiot!" shouted the detective.

"Some time we will refer to *that*, again. For the present, I can prove my innocence by Alf Cone."

"That's right," Alf agreed. "I was with him, an' I know no woman wa'n't about. He had other fish ter fry, an' ef any female had been thar I should hev seen her."

"You will see that your accusation falls through," calmly added the Explorer. "You had better not have made it, for it will recoil on yourself. My innocence is established; now, let me see what you—"

"Established by whom? By the word of a man you have bought up; by the word of a notorious tough, outlaw and liar; by—"

There was a howl of anger which drowned even his loud-pitched voice, a forward leap, and in a moment more Ashmead lay upon his back with Alf Cone kneeling on his breast.

"Oh! you skunk!" roared the mountaineer, "I'll hev satisfaction for that! Liar, be I? Tough, be I? Outlaw, be I? Oh! I'll make you sweat fer that!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT LAY IN THE CANYON.

ASHMEAD was in danger of immediate bodily harm, but Dead-Shot Paul, who was growing accustomed to breaking in on the quarrels of his ill-assorted companions, put his hand in front of Alf Cone.

"Be patient!" he urged. "We can afford to postpone settlement of grievances for the present, for work of far more importance demands our attention. Get up, Alf, and leave me to deal with him. He has taken Rachel away, and his accusation is only a desperate resort."

"I take her away?" retorted Ashmead. "Why, I can prove an *alibi* by your own pet ruffian, Turk Todd. I was with him and Bunker all the while!"

"That statement admits of proof or disproof, and one of the two we will have quickly. Alf, go and send Turk Todd here."

"I s'pose I kin do et," grumbled the mountaineer, "though I hate like sin ter let this critter go. One thing is sart'in; the next man who calls me a name will git my knife in his vitals. I hope you all hear *that*!"

Surly to an extreme, Alf slowly rose, glared once at Ashmead, and then marched away. The detective rose. He was now humiliated as well as angry, and determined to have a settlement with Dead-Shot Paul. He would have begun at once, but, knowing he could prove his own innocence, was wise enough to do that before making more words.

Turk Todd came, and the question was put to him plainly.

"Ash is right," he confessed, unwillingly. "He come ter Bunker an' me jest as I seen you an' Alf go off with the torches, an' he stayed right with us until you come back ag'in!"

Paul was bewildered. He, too, it will be remembered, had seen Ashmead start toward the main entrance, and, in any case, Turk's word was not to be doubted. After a pause the Explorer addressed the man he had accused:

"I am compelled to admit I have done you injustice in this matter. I beg your pardon for it!"

"But I have no occasion to beg yours!" cried Ashmead, with a mixture of jubilation and anger. "Your flimsy attempt to shift your own guilt upon me will not work. You have stolen my prisoner—the prisoner of an officer of law!"

"I have accepted your *alibi*; will you not take mine?"

"I will not!"

"Then I have no more to say to you."

Turning quickly to Turk, he added:

"Recall Alf Cone, and let us search every foot of the cave. If Rachel is here she shall be found."

He heard Ashmead fling some retort after him, but did not heed it. He gathered Turk and Alf to his aid, and then the three began the search. In half an hour they had looked in every part of the cave known to them, and the result only emphasized the first suspicion; *Rachel was gone!*

It was a severe, unexpected and untimely blow. Paul felt it more than he would confess. Events had actually forced him to sympathize with her, and he was troubled now. Where was she? In what new peril was she placed? Could she be recovered?

All this he put out of his mind for the pres-

ent to consider the more timely question, *How had she gone?* He felt confident she had not deliberately deserted them without telling him of her intention. The third exit would furnish the chance, but why should she desert known friends and defenders at a time when life-seeking foes were outside?

She had not gone of her own free will—and Dave Ashmead had not taken her away.

How had she gone?

The Explorer's gaze wandered to the fire as he considered the matter. There sat Mrs. Grantlee and Eli Gulliver—the first firm and quiet; the second, poking the brands of the fire and smiling his smile of childish glee as he saw the sparks fly before the touch.

They were the only persons who could have done the work.

Paul believed them capable of any detestable act, but it was going to an extreme to suspect a woman and a bound man of such prompt and successful work. But was Eli bound? Paul walked forward to see, and found the bonds in place. It was a new disappointment, and he straightened up with a feeling of utter defeat. As he did so he caught Mrs. Grantlee looking at him from the other side of the fire. Her gaze dropped at once, but not soon enough.

He had read malicious triumph in her eyes!

Quickly he went to her side.

"Madam, it was *you* who did this; you have decoyed Rachel away!" he declared.

"You are wrong," she returned, promptly, yet quietly.

"Your own eyes have betrayed you."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't want to talk with a monomaniac," she answered coldly.

"You say it well, but I know you equally well. You and your brother—this Eli Gulliver—are bound that she shall never reach the settlements to be tried. You have audacity and nerve, and luck has befriended you. Still, you have not triumphed, yet. Will you tell me where Rachel is?"

"I don't know, and don't care!"

"The rest of us, including Eli Gulliver, are about to leave the cave. Do you want to be left behind?"

She suddenly raised her eyes, and they were flashing with the hatred she had long kept in check, but now vailed no longer.

"Paul Culver," she replied, "I do not care what you do. You have persecuted me, lied about me, hounded me from day to day, and all to gratify an old grudge. You have on every occasion shown your meanness, and I have been compelled to endure it humbly. Now I will bear it no longer! Here and now, when I need most the help a man should give to woman, I tell you that I scorn and loathe you! I know no words strong enough to express my feelings. I hate you!—*I hate you!*"

It was a vindictive outburst, and the worst side of the woman's nature was visible. It was not, as she would have it thought, the expression of an honorable person wronged, but the evil, the malignant hatred, the depravity that was within her blazed forth in a fierce fire.

Pathfinder Paul bowed.

"We will not discuss the point," he answered, his voice showing no emotion; then, as Ashmead advanced, he addressed him: "Do you go with us?"

"Go with you?"

"Turk Todd, Bunker, Cone, Gulliver and myself are about to leave the cave. You have expressed dissatisfaction with my methods. Do you wish to go with us, or not?"

Ashmead looked at Mrs. Grantlee, hesitated, then replied:

"I certainly don't want to stay here alone, and though I enter a protest against the whole thing, I'll go along."

"As you see fit."

It was deemed prudent to leave one man at the main entrance until the fugitives had time to go out by the other avenue, and Turk was chosen for the position. Then the others started. Ashmead escorted Mrs. Grantlee, while Eli Gulliver, his legs at liberty but his hands bound, was led by Alf Cone.

Paul was very reluctant to go without Rachel, but felt that it would be the ruin of all to stay where they were. She must be searched for later.

The third exit had been chosen for their departure, and to this they went. It was much like the other small opening, and blind, rather than difficult of passage. All descended in safety.

Bat and Alf agreed to get the necessary horses from the Indians' drove, and, with Paul's acquiescence, they went about it at once. The others waited in silence, and the period was one of painful uncertainty to the Explorer.

Turk Todd was the first to appear, but, just after, the mountaineers came in sight with the horses. They had made a successful venture, and one great point was gained. All mounted and the retreat was begun.

Straight ahead of them a patch of silver marked the heavens at the horizon. It was the advance of the moon, which would in due time give its light, but then the friendly shades of night hung over the gulches. It was in their

favor, it seemed, though they might be injured by it if matters went a certain way.

Silence had been enjoined upon all, and one, at least, was likely to obey; Eli Gulliver had been gagged, despite Ashmead's evident but unspoken indignation. Eli had taken this new misfortune without a word.

Paul and Turk led the way, with Alf and Bat in the rear, and the others midway in the party. Thus the journey was begun.

The scouts had their weapons ready for use, and their eyes never were at rest. Dark though it was, it was possible to trace the outline of bush and rock in most places, and it was for the dreaded dark object that moved with animate life that they looked, fearing yet hoping not to see aught of the kind.

They drew away—one hundred yards, two hundred. They reached a miniature canyon. Darker there were the shadows, but the utter silence was reassuring. Without pause they continued.

But danger was there, and it came so suddenly that even the scouts were taken unawares. In the twinkling of an eye the canyon was alive with men—they seemed to be vomited up from the bowels of the earth; they closed around the fugitives; they seized horses by the rein and riders by the leg; they in some cases leaped upon the steeds that already bore riders; and they struck bewildering blows with heavy weapons.

Paul and Turk had at once rallied to meet the danger, but the enemy appeared numberless; they actually seemed to compress the horses, and a dozen hands were on each scout at once. Then two words passed Dead-Shot Paul's lips.

"Break through!"

Turk responded with a yell loud and dauntless, and the attempt was made, but though the horses made a gallant effort to obey the will of their riders, they could not gain a yard. Then blows were rained upon the men, and Paul found his senses deserting him. He grew bewildered, and his own blows lost strength; he knew no more.

When he recovered some object was poking at his face. He knew not, cared not what it was. A weight of lead seemed to be upon his head, and fetters upon his limbs. But the poking continued, and he at last opened his eyes.

His own horse stood over him, affectionately asking for a sign of recognition. He raised his hand and caressed the faithful animal's face, but in apathy. He looked around him in idle curiosity.

The canyon!—ha! the place had interest, after all. His dulled perceptions quickened into life; his memory returned. He made an effort and gained a sitting position.

The light of day, and the yellow radiance of the sun, were in the canyon, and the light showed the deeply marked soil where the struggle had taken place, but the contestants of the night were gone.

All? No; close to Paul lay a still figure, and a red stain was on the hand which lay on the face, as if the hand had been raised to shield the owner from deadly blows.

The figure, still and blood-stained, was that of Turk Todd!

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WORK OF A FIEND.

DEAD-SHOT PAUL was startled.

Honest Turk was bound to him by many a debt of gratitude, rendered and received, and many a trail had they gone on in harmony and friendship. And now—now, it looked as if the last trail had been trod.

The Explorer gained his feet and went to his comrade. His worst fears were not confirmed; Turk still lived, but was unconscious. Near at hand a little stream of water wound its way. To this Paul carried his companion, and began to bathe his head. He worked well, but Turk's stifled currents of life were slow to respond.

Leaving him for the time the Pathfinder looked about. Another horse was near; Turk's own. The two horses, always accustomed to being together, remained in company now.

No other living thing was to be seen, and it was clear that the Indians had done their chosen work well, and gone. Yet Paul did not despair. He was very lame and sore, and more than one bruise was on his head and body, but life remained.

"I think I shall live to seek vengeance!" he spoke, aloud, as he returned to his comrade.

Again he worked, and this time more successfully. Slowly Turk's life came back. In a few minutes there were promising signs, and, finally, he was conscious. He sat up, and the younger man told all he knew.

"It's been another close call," Turk commented. "I hev seen a heap on 'em in my day, an' they always give a feller the impression that they ain't good ter take. Wal, Dead-Shot, we got pretty well done up, an' we'd be alone in the wilds, sick, sore, unarmed an' friendless, ef it wa'n't for our hosses. I don't know how you figger it that them animals stayed hyer—some would say et was all chance—but I say they knowed us an' stayed by us. A hoss an' a dog, Dead-Shot, is faithfuler than most men!"

"You are right, friend Turk."

"How do I look? Anything like a feller goin' ter see his sweetheart?"

"Hardly! You never were a beauty, Mr. Todd, and now dust and blood are all over you."

"I'd rather hev them over me than three feet of earth, Dead-Shot; I had, by mighty! I hope you won't need ter put that load onter me."

"Never fear; you'll come out all right."

"I hope so. I don't know anybody that's more interested in my case than I be, an' I really hope so; but I'm powerful weak. See ef I kin stand!"

He made the attempt, and succeeded, but sunk back.

"I'd rather set here fer a bit. Say, et's past breakfast time, an' I'm wounded hungry. Kin you git a feller anything ter eat?"

It was an important question, for, certainly, both needed nourishing food, and plenty of it, to bring back their strength, but no food was there, and they had no weapons to capture game.

"We shall have to return to the cave," suggested Paul. "I'll call the horses, and we can ride to the main entrance. I fancy the redskins are gone before now. Your horse—"

The Explorer looked around for the animal, and then saw something that gave him surprise. A horseman was coming down the canyon, and he was no stranger. It was Bat Bunker.

He, too, looked like an apostle of hard luck. He had more dirt upon him than usual, which was unnecessary, and several smears of blood adorned his face, while his shirt was torn nearly off from his person.

He at first reined in his horse, as if in uncertainty, and then rode rapidly toward them.

"Darnation! et et ain't you!" he cried. "I thought everybody but me was dead. Whar's Alf Cone? Say, has that homely cuss gone under? Ef so, I will never carry rifle ag'in, by thunder!"

They could not tell him of Alf, but upon a suggestion that mutual explanations were in order, he stated that he, and he alone, had succeeded in riding his horse through the Indians, but that, in urging the animal too hard, it had stumbled and thrown him so heavily as to stun him.

"I'm feelin' fair," he added, "but I've only jest got around. I shot a mountain sheep an' had a feed, an' then took one-quarter o' the carcass an' started ter hunt up somebody. Want ter buy any fresh meat?"

Bunker asked the question jokingly, and exhibited the quarter, and he had his answer quick enough. They were hungry, and any kind of food would have been welcome, then. They said so, and Bunker sprang to the ground.

"Durned ef I don't cook ye a breakfast myself. Et ain't in my line, but I've swore'd a big oath ter hev revenge on them reds fer hammerin' me all ter pieces, an' I reckon I kin find helpers in you, ef I bring yer 'round. Set still, an' I'll cook the grub. Say, I only hope that durned Ashmead is done up!"

"Don't you know the fate of anybody?" Paul asked.

"Not a one! I'm only jest in the saddle, but I'm red-hot ter git ter work. Ef Alf Cone is done up, thar will be a long, red score ter settle."

Bunker talked freely as he hurried around, and they were willing to let him do the work. Even Paul was dizzy when he tried to stand, and Turk was content to lie down. Bat built a fire and cooked a supply of the meat with neatness and dispatch.

"Fall to!" he directed. "Eat hearty, an' give the house a good name."

Somehow, both men had tremendous appetites, and they ate long and ravenously. Bat joked them on their greed, but cooked, carved and handed over generous slices until they were satisfied.

"That stuff will fix ye out!" he asserted, "an' your strength will come back like a bound in' buffalo bull, by Beelzebub! The next thing yer need is sleep. You didn't get none last night, an' of course you wa'n't restin' when you lay the same as dead. S'pose you take a bit of a snooze, while I go on a scout an' see ef I kin learn anything?"

The proposition pleased the scouts. They had been deprived of rest so long that, now, getting such a hearty breakfast upon their stomachs, made them feel dull, stupid and sleepy. They accepted Bat's offer, and, in the lack of blankets, lay down on the sand where they were.

"Call us in two hours," Paul directed.

"All right, boss; I'll see that you're awake by that time. You sha'n't sleep too long."

The Pathfinder was dimly conscious that Bunker said something more, but he did not catch the words, or care to ask for their repetition.

He slept.

When he awoke he opened his eyes promptly. Bat Bunker was not standing over him, and it seemed that it was not Bat that had awakened him. Something else had—a rending, tearing pain in his stomach; a pain so acute that he instinctively rose to a sitting position. This last movement gave him nausea of the stomach, much to his surprise.

"Strangel!" he muttered. "Can it be I over-

ate, and that, in my feeble state, my stomach can't digest the load?"

A still sharper pain made him grimace and destroyed the theory. That was no dyspeptic pain. A groan at his side diverted his attention. Turk Todd lay there, but was evidently in the grasp of a nightmare. His face was distorted, and his hands tightly clinched. Paul hastened to arouse him.

The scout opened his eyes.

"Oh! is that you, Pathfinder?" he spoke, cheerfully. "I reckon I've over-slept— Say! I've got a drasted pain in my insides!"

He broke off suddenly and clasped both hands over his stomach.

"I'm burnin' up in hyer!" he declared, "an' et feels as ef an auger was borin' through me. Yee; an' I'm sick enough, too, ter throw up auger, stomach, an' all!"

Paul regarded the speaker anxiously. It was singular that both of them had that fierce pain.

"Can it be the meat?" he asked.

"Why should it be the meat?"

"True; why? but I'm in just the same way. Now, what else could do it?"

"You're the same way? Drast it! that's funny!"

Before he could say more, the older scout was seized with additionally sharp pains, and only a strong exercise of his will prevented him from writhing.

"Ef Bat Bunker had jest shot that sheep the meat couldn't be out o' kilter, could it?" he added, presently. "Don't see how it could be, unless—"

He paused as a certain thought entered his mind; a thought which was but the echo of what had been in Paul's head for several seconds. Paul read that suspicion and quickly exclaimed:

"Unless Bat Bunker has dealt us a blow. Evil as the man is, the idea seems too severe to be entertained, but—has Bunker poisoned us?"

The men gazed at each other for a moment in silence, and then Turk began struggling to his feet.

"I've got ter hev water," he said. "I'm burnin' up with the fire in my stomach. Hullo! what's this?"

A few feet away a short stick was thrust in the sand, and on the upright end was impaled a scrap of paper. It was a circumstance so unusual, and so suggestive, that he made haste to secure the paper. This done, he passed it to the Explorer.

"Read it!" he exclaimed.

A few lines of boldly-written words were on the paper, and this is what Paul read:

"Your day is past. You bucked the wrong tiger when you set out to bully and persecute Eli Gulliver. You did not know what you were doing, but when you have read this you'll know what you have done. Your sins have reeled on your own heads. When I was with you, I was subject d to insults, indignities and hardships which I need not recall. It was in my power not to endure all this, but I preferred to bide my time. I did so, and, now, my time has come! Are you in pain? Do you suffer from nausea and thirst? Know you that it is thus I am revenged. You are dying of poison, and I am a free man. I am revenged! Die, you; die like dogs! There's no help for you. See in this the retributive of him who never again will assume the cheap disguise of—"

"ELI GULLIVER."

Under this bold, regular writing a few words had been scrawled in an irregular, clumsy hand:

"It may be tough, but you would had ter some time, anyhow. Hope yer won't blame me!"

"BAT BUNKER."

The explanation was clear—terribly clear.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LEFT TO DIE!

"POISONED!"

Turk Todd uttered the word in a husky voice, and as the scouts gazed at each other, horror was in both faces.

They had faced death in about every form known to the West, and faced it fearlessly, but what quality of bravery will make man proof against such a blow?

"You see we were right about Eli Gulliver," Paul replied.

"Yes, yes; but even we didn't give him credit fer tech devilish villainy as this. An' Bat Bunker, too! Et ain't only a few hours sence we was workin' in harmony with him, an' now it's his hand that does this job."

"He has gone over to Gulliver, body and soul. It does not surprise me, as far as Bunker is concerned. We know him of old, and you also know that we always stood in fear, when at the cave, of treachery from him or Cone."

"Et's come; et's come! Oh! but wouldn't I give a pile ter live until I could be revenged on Bat Bunker! Oh! the villain, the traitor, the bloody murderer!"

Turk only ceased to speak because of the terrible nausea that seized upon him. He threw himself flat on the ground, and Paul followed his example. They could do nothing for themselves.

The fierce pain they were undergoing doubled their figures up whether they would have it so or not. For several minutes there was silence, each man heroically preventing groan or lament from passing his lips, but Turk finally gasped, thickly:

"I reckon we've got ter die!"

Then his writhing stomach seemed to rise to his throat, and with it came a portion of its contents. He vomited freely, and the occurrence caused Paul to follow his example. This brought momentary relief physically, but not mentally. The greenish hue of everything thus ejected corroborated Eli Gulliver's statement that they were to die there.

"I reckon our wills won't never be admitted ter probate," sighed Turk. "I ain't had time ter make mine, an' it's too late, now."

"I have nothing to will but a debt of vengeance on Gulliver and Bunker. It is hard to think those men must go unpunished, for their crime is fiendish and cowardly. There is a reason why, after leaving us, at first, with life in us, Bat was sent back to finish the work, but it is useless to study on it."

Neither man cared to study; he had all he could do to meet his bodily pains.

The sun mounted higher in the heavens, but it found them still in the canyon. They occasionally ejected matter from their stomachs, and in each case found brief relief, but neither felt any hope. This was the record of hours.

"I'm gettin' powerful weak," finally sighed Turk, "but I kinder reckon I won't die hard. The pain ain't so hard as it was. I feel a good bit easier."

The statement caused Paul to meditate for a moment, and then a strange look flashed to his face. He, too, had been thinking what Turk had put in words, for his own agony had abated perceptibly. Now, he caught at the idea that these symptoms meant more than easy dissolution.

"Turk!" he cried, "the chief remedy for a poisoned man is to have his stomach cleared by an emetic, and heaven knows we have vomited freely enough. Can it—can it be we have escaped death?"

The scout looked up eagerly.

"Do you think that?" he demanded.

"I don't feel like a dying man."

"Nor me, by mighty!"

"Old friend, we ate ravenously of that meat; far more than was to be expected. It is just possible that we got an over-dose of the poison, and that it saved our lives by making us throw the stuff up."

Turk wrung the speaker's hand feebly.

"You give me reel hope, an' I feel it may be true. We may live ter go on many a trail, yet. But I'm wounded weak; yes, I be!"

They were both weak, but this did not trouble them seriously. They ceased to eject anything from their stomachs, and the cessation did not give them the old, fierce pain. True, a part of it remained, but as the hours continued to pass the pain grew less, and they were happy in the conviction that grew upon them.

Death was not to be their lot; the world had something in store for them besides a grave above ground in the lonely canyon.

Night drew near and found them in good spirits, but it also suggested the need of getting to a better and more secure place. Being mutually of the opinion that none of the enemy would return to the cave, they became anxious to go there, themselves. Some days of convalescence must ensue before they would be fit for active work, and not only would the cave be a shelter, but there yet remained food, there, which would be of vital importance.

"We'll go there," Turk decided.

They started, but it was the most painful journey either ever undertook. They were obliged to crawl every yard of the way, and to rest frequently, at that. Still, progress was made, and, at last, just as darkness was falling, they passed the pillars and were under the vaulted roof.

The embers of the fire yet remained, and a fresh supply of wood brought a cheerful blaze. They prepared a little broth, drank it with gratifying results, and lay down to sleep in a contented frame of mind.

The next morning they were weak and, as Turk expressed it, "all broke up," but this did not prevent them from being cheerful and happy. They no longer feared death from the poison, and they settled down to the inevitable necessity of slow recuperation. In the afternoon their eagerness to see the trail of the enemy led Paul to undertake a journey outside, but his strength proved insufficient. He had to return after going a short distance.

That night there was a heavy rain.

After that there could be no such thing as trailing with hope of success, and they fell back upon the plan of finding the foe, ultimately, by means of a regular search.

After this they gained rapidly, and, on the succeeding afternoon, went out for a scout. They had no weapons whatever, for Bat Bunker had relieved them of what few they had left when they last met him, and they hoped to get a new supply.

This they did not succeed in doing, nor did they see a human being, or a horse, or find any clew to the course taken by the departing marauders.

Still another day came, and they found themselves so well that they determined to leave the cave. All the while they had been there their

minds had been occupied with certain questions, and these now became more vivid.

Where was Rachel, and how had she so strangely disappeared from the cave?

Where had the Indians and their allies and prisoners gone?—if any were prisoners.

What was the mystery of Eli Gulliver's life? What was his connection with the Indians? Who and what was he, when seen in his real way of life?

These were the questions the scouts now had to solve, for solve them they were bound to do if such a thing was possible.

"We've been at death's door by the contrivance of human fiends," spoke Turk Todd, as the comrades stood at the cave-entrance, "an' I ain't the man ter overlook it. I'm bound ter hev satisfaction!"

"I am with you."

"Ef we was Golf Harmer men we would git this satisfaction by shootin' half a dozen men in the back, but that ain't my way. I want ter beat them, first, b' mighty!"

"Gulliver and Bunker must answer for their diabolical crime, but our purpose is higher than that. We go to avenge more than our own wrongs; to bring more than one, or two, men to justice; to learn the mystery of Gulliver's life, and to follow the fortunes of Dave Ashmead's party to the finish. The sun is mounting up the sky, Turk. Let us go!"

On foot and unarmed they began the work. First of all they scouted around the range to look for signs, but moved several miles without noteworthy incident.

They were passing through a wooded point, five miles from the cave, when, suddenly, a bullet whistled past them, narrowly missing a lodging-place in human flesh. They sprang for cover, but not so soon but that other shots followed, and, even when they were safely sheltered, the fusillade was kept up, there being a distinct pause between each shot.

More than all, wilder firing never had been seen. Some of the bullets plowed the ground, and others cut twigs from the tops of the high trees.

Paul and Turk exchanged glances.

"What in thunder hev we got here?" Turk demanded.

"Wild marksmen, certainly."

"Crazy marksmen, b' mighty! A blind man could do better."

"It may be a single person, man or woman—a novice with a repeating rifle. In any case, I think he is in a panic, and I propose that we move upon him at once. Do you take one side, and I'll go the other. The nature of the ground favors swift, secret work. Make a detour and get around to the rear. Don't be seen, for we are unarmed. We may stock up, here!"

The plan met with Turk's approval, and they went at once. The firing had ceased and all was quiet, but they had located the marksman well enough to proceed intelligently.

Securing the shelter of bush, rock and tree Dead-Shot Paul made a semicircle agreed upon in a short time. He had anticipated some difficulty in sighting the unknown, but the result brought a smile to his face.

He reached a slight mound of earth and, raising his head cautiously, looked down the descent. He saw a flat rock, and on the rock was a man. He lay prostrate, with his gaze directed toward a point where he had last seen his unwilling targets. In front of him were eight rifles, all lying on the rocks, the muzzles pointing in the same direction.

And he, lying beside them, was looking for his supposed foes, prepared to fire another volley, and oblivious of danger in the rear.

All this was so ridiculous that Paul was amused, but the sight gave him a more agreeable feeling, even, than that. He determined to have a share in the rifles.

He looked at their possessor. He was a slender man—Ha! Paul saw something more. The marksman was no stranger.

It was Barton Grantlee!

CHAPTER XXVII.

A HERO IN THE WILDS.

THE discovery was unexpected, but it promptly put an end to Paul's disposition to be amused. It was certainly absurd and comical enough to see Grantlee with his array of rifles and total disregard of danger from the rear; and it was clear that, having sighted what he supposed to be enemies, he had, alone, fired off all the rifles in such hot haste that earth and air had alike been aimed at; and it was also plain that he was in a state bordering on collapse from fear, but there was more than that in the meeting.

Turk Todd came up and reported that he had seen no one, and they decided that Grantlee was alone.

Paul called his name. The man looked up.

"Who speaks? Who calls me?" he demanded, his eyes rolling wildly in his pale face. "Have I a friend near?"

The Dead-Shot stepped into view.

"I am here."

"Thank Heaven, thank Heaven! there is somebody to protect me! That is—ah!—look out, Culver; there's a band of Indians down there."

"How do you know?"

"I saw two, and fired at them."

Van R. Barton Grantless hesitated, drew himself up and continued with dignity:

"We had quite a fusillade, several shots being fired on each side. They covered me repeatedly, but by close watching I always got a shot ahead of them. I fancy I winged several of them, and it is very likely I have put them to flight."

He handled the fiction in good shape, and the scouts did not see fit to upset his serenity or strip him of his fancied laurels of bravery.

"Where are your companions?" Paul inquired.

"Be Jawvel! that's just what I want to know. I'm all alone here, and have been ever since the fight. I was knocked down and left for dead, and I've been wandering about ever since. Fact is, I'm hopelessly lost, be Jawvel! and I hope you'll set me right."

"Do you mean that you haven't seen any of our party since the fight in the timber a week ago?"

"That's it, exactly. Haven't you? Don't you know where they are?"

The Explorer deferred making a statement until he learned Grantlee's exact situation. This furnished fuel for additional amusement. He had with him four horses, together with rifles, revolvers, knives, blankets and food enough for a dozen men. Having these things at his fingers' end after the fight in the timber, he had laid in a full supply.

"Hoping you would meet us, I suppose?"

"No," Grantlee replied; "so I could make a bold and daring campaign, if pressed to it. The weapons I took so as to be sure I had enough, and the horses, partly to carry my things and partly so I could change saddles in a long race. My ideas," he added, with dignity, "have proved wise. I've had five running fights with the Comanches—I—I mean, the Sioux, or whatever these hostiles are; and have beaten them every time. The assault on my position here—you heard the firing, of course—was made by over twenty red devils, but I think I've put them to flight utterly."

These preposterous claims passed unchallenged.

"Well, Grantlee, we have seen nearly the whole of the party since you have. We all lived through it, but were besieged in a cave by the Indians. Your wife was there, but she bore it well—she had Ashmead to console her, and seemed quite happy in his presence."

The husband flushed.

"Did she? Did she, 'demit! Be Jawvel! how did she know whether I was alive or not?"

"Oh! Ashmead was alive."

"'Demit! what right had he to console my wife? If I were dead, or possibly not living, I shouldn't want my wife consoled. No, sir!"

"Well, she seemed willing, and was cheerful and happy with him."

Mr. Grantlee turned several different colors, and proceeded to give the opinion that Dave Ashmead was a "damned villain." All his jealousy was aroused, and the scouts did not try to curb it. They were willing Ashmead and Mrs. Grantlee should reap as they sowed. When Van R. Barton grew calmer he asked for particulars, and they rapidly, but plainly, told him enough of occurrences at the cave to make him well informed. He was more than this; he was very angry.

"Be Jawvel! when I meet Ashmead he shall fight me to the death! I'll teach him a lesson; I'll cut out his—his—his heart, sir, 'demit!"

The speaker had nearly said "liver," instead of heart, but finally concluded that that part of the detective's anatomy should be ignored.

"Your wife's conduct disappoints you, don't it, Mr. Grantlee?"

"Why, it's villainous!"

"I think that fellow, Gulliver, is responsible for a good deal of this; but then, he's her brother, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"What's he doing up here?"

"Be Jawvel! I don't know. He's a mystery to me, for he seems to have some secret power; I don't know what. I fancy he has told my wife, but they keep it from me. Why, 'demit! I'm only a figure-head, anyhow!"

Relying upon Barton's jealousy, Paul skillfully tried to worm something out of him about the mystery in which Rachel Morey was being made the victim, but Grantlee at once took alarm and denied everything. The attempt was a failure, and was abandoned.

Next, negotiations were opened for horses and arms, and here they succeeded well. Grantlee led the way to his quartette of horses and put two of the number at their disposal. When he had added rifles, revolvers, knives and ammunition, the scouts found themselves equipped for service. They were thus under obligations to Barton, but both shrunk from the thought of taking him along on their trip. He would be a constant drag and menace, and might ruin all their plans.

"What are you going to do now, Mr. Grantlee?" Paul asked.

"Be Jawvel! I'm going to get back to civilization, if I can."

"That's simple enough. I have a compass

which I found when at the cave the last time—lost, I think, by Ashmead—and with this and the sun you ought to be able to hold a direct course."

"I haven't succeeded well, thus far. Where are you and Todd going?"

"Into the mountains. Our winter season is about at hand."

"Then I don't want to go with you; I would freeze to death in this barbarous climate before spring. Besides, I want to find my wife and Ashmead, and settle our troubles—settle them with blood, sir; with blood, 'demit! I'd like to accommodate you and Todd, but I think I'll go south."

This was said with visible and genuine reluctance, for he was afraid to be alone. Next, he offered them five hundred dollars to guide him to a point of safety. The offer was refused, and then they separated. Paul and Turk mounted and rode away toward the north.

The acquisition of horses and weapons put them in high spirits, and they felt capable of taking care of themselves thereafter. More than that, they were ready for active and aggressive work. They had a theory as to where their enemies were to be looked for, and intended to test it. There was no danger that Ashmead was on his way south with Rachel; Eli Gulliver did not wish her to be taken back, and she would not be, at present.

Hence, all parties were undoubtedly in the wilds, and it was there the scouts must go.

It was three days later, and Paul and Turk were on the side of a wooded range. Their horses had been left in a place of concealment, and they were cautiously threading the thick growth of trees.

Pushing on, they suddenly and unexpectedly arrived at a cliff, upon the top of which bushes grew to the very edge. Parting these they saw a small valley below, and a place far from lifeless and primeval.

Shanties built of the resources of the woods were there, and men were grouped around them; rough, ill-dressed, dirty, vagabondish-looking fellows, such as are never pleasant to the eye.

"Golf Harmer's gang, sure enough!" Turk commented.

"Yes," Paul answered; "I see familiar faces there. Hal that I do! Look! do you not see Bat Bunker and Alf Cone over by the most northerly cabin?"

Turk pushed his rifle forward.

"Obl' ef you'd give me a shot at the drasted critters!"

"Nonsense! You wouldn't fire for a small fortune. We have risked too much, and labored too much, to lose all now by hasty action. At last, Turk, we have the enemy run to his hole. The next question is, Does this camp contain anybody but Golf's men?"

"There's a mighty spick-and-span shanty over yonder that looks out o' place hyer. Et may be Golf's, but nobody ever suspected him of bein' fastidius. Still, ef it ain't his, whose is it?"

The scouts lay quiet and watched for an answer. They had come there filled with hope, yet well aware that they were daring great danger. They were fully recovered from the poison they had swallowed a week before, but there were enough men thereabouts to dispose of them in short order, if they were discovered.

Golf Harmer's band was not all they had to fear. A mile away, on the other side of the ridge, two-score of Indians were in camp. Of them the scouts knew two things—that it was the same band they had met at the cave, and that they, or a part of their number, had just come in from a marauding expedition, laden with spoils.

A sound in the woods caused both explorers to turn their attention from the scene below.

"Some one's comin'!" Turk commented.

"Yes."

"An' they're comin' nigh to us, drast it!"

"Lie low! I think we are safe."

The sounds came nearer, and became distinguishable as the progress of two or more persons. They were moving slowly, yet in such a way as to show they were not on a secret errand. Their voices became audible.

"One is a woman!" Paul whispered.

Then nearer yet walked the objects of interest, and the bushes opened to admit of the progress of the walkers of the cliff. Both watchers saw that they were two in number; that one was a man, and the other a woman. But it was not this fact, merely, that made the scouts both draw a deep breath.

They had recognized Dave Ashmead and Mrs. Grantlee!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HEARD IN AMBUSH.

"DRAST it! we've sighted some more o' them!"

Turk Todd whispered the word in exultation, but Paul touched him warningly to enjoin silence, and there was nothing to betray their presence.

For a moment, however, it looked as if discov-

ery awaited them, for Ashmead and Mrs. Grantlee were coming directly toward them, but a friendly log lay by the way, and upon this they sat down. They seemed to take position a good deal nearer to each other than was necessary, too.

They had been silent, and this continued for a moment, but Ashmead finally spoke:

"Another day of inactivity is nearly gone!"

"Is life unbearable to you here?" Mrs. Grantlee asked, half petulantly.

"Unbearable? Never, never! Don't misunderstand me, Martha, for there is no reason why you should. I am very happy in your society, but I do not forget that I am a man with a business profession; a poor man, too, who has got to make his mark in the world or go down to the grave without fame or—honor!"

He hesitated over the last word, and a peculiar look showed in his face as if he had some doubts as to whether the term fitted him well. But Mrs. Grantlee laid her hand on his arm and spoke softly:

"Such an ambition is noble and lofty."

"It can't be satisfied here."

"No, but other days, and weeks, and years, are coming."

"It is the ambition of my life to bring Rachel Morey to the felon's dock," he proceeded. "That vague suspicion of mine that she may be in the Indian camp is not gone, and I am considering how I can prove or disprove it."

Mrs. Grantlee started.

"Are you going there?"

"Why not?"

"We are all forbidden the freedom of their village without special permit, and even when there under leave, there is nothing to be seen. You spoke, the other day, of going secretly, but, surely, you would not risk it."

"A detective's life is one of risks."

"But among Indians—Dave, you must remember me! I feel sure the wretched woman is not there, and if anything should happen to you—consider my situation then!"

Ashmead moved uneasily.

"I do consider it, but my duty—"

"Always your 'duty,' never, me!"

"Martha, I swear that I am devoted to you!" cried the infatuated man. "Have I not proved it? Are not your interests always in my mind?"

"Yes, yes; you are good and kind, and all that is noble. But I am jealous of your ambition, I fear, just now. Later, I will not object, but while I am ill I feel that you ought not to run any risk. I need you to keep my courage up—it is so terrible to be ill among these rough men, and so far from any town."

Mrs. Grantlee tried to assume the air and look of an invalid, but she struggled against difficulties; she never had looked so healthy before, and her red cheeks would have undeceived any one not under a spell.

"Martha," Ashmead replied, "I told you when you were taken ill that I would drop all other work and remain by you until you were fully well, and I have kept my promise. I intend to keep it, but I hope, for more reasons than one, that you will recover soon. You know we have private business to do."

"Yes."

Mrs. Grantlee tapped her foot upon the ground and looked severe.

"If Barton Grantlee is dead," Ashmead added, "I fear our marriage may be delayed. It will, I anticipate, be hard to prove his death."

"Why can't the suit for divorce go on just the same? It don't rest with us to prove him dead. If we find him alive, we apply for the divorce, anyhow. If he's dead, the divorce certainly will be legal."

The woman spoke flippantly, but Ashmead looked a little shocked.

"It might seem like undue haste if we did make the application when he was dead—that is, if people learned he was dead, and it came out that we suspected it, our motives might be misconstrued."

"Of course we don't want to be severe," agreed Mrs. Grantlee, more cautiously. "Barton has abused me so that all my love for him is gone, but I wish him well; and, as you say, we should show due respect. But let us leave this subject until we get home again."

"I sometimes wonder if, at home, we shall be as happy as we are here. Here, I have you all to myself, and the days are like dreams of substantial nature, full of life and affection."

"It is so with me, Dave; I am very happy!"

The couple proceeded to say the same thing a dozen times over, varying the exact words a little, but hanging to the main idea as if it could not be stated too many times.

This was the employment for the next hour, but they finally concluded to move on. They did so, going at right angles with their former course, and were soon out of sight and hearing.

"Wal, I'll be durned! I'll be durned ter durnation!"

The words arose in a serio-comic voice from where Turk Todd lay.

"That's what I call an interestin' conversation," he added. "Et's a screamer from 'way-back! Et's a tail-feather out o' Cupid's crown! Gosh-ter-all-hemlocks! did yer ever hear the like on't, Dead-Shot?"

"The brevet widow seems to be going in strong."

"Sae's a hustler!"

"That poor fool of an Ashmead is hopelessly in the toils, and caught, too, by a woman who hasn't one grain of honor. I don't know how she feels in regard to Barton Grantlee, but one thing is sure: she don't care a picayune for Ashmead. She's playing with him!"

"Fact, by mighty!"

"Observe how she met his desire to get Rachel Morey back to the settlements! Clearly, she is still determined that Rachel shall not go back, but even her plain opposition does not enable Ashmead to see the point."

"The poor feller is like a bird charmed by a rattler; he can't git away. I rather pity him, for he ain't of the same piece as the drasted critters who are befoolin' him."

"True. They have blinded him well, as to Rachel. It seems that, to make him defer searching for her, they no sooner reached here than Mrs. Grantlee feigned illness, so he could not leave her. He has been kept in check by this means ever since, and in idleness."

"Not wholly idle," Turk declared, with a humorous smile. "They hev killed Barton Grantlee off, divorced him from his wadder, got engaged in matrimony, theirselves, an' kicked up their heels in pasture, in general, like two colts. Wonder ef they've got Bart's epitaph studied out? Et will prob'ly be, 'What is his loss is our gain!'"

"What of Ashmead's suspicion that Rachel is in the Indian camp?"

"Correct!"

"Do you think so?"

"Sure!"

"It seems that, however it may be with Mrs. Grantlee, Ashmead has lost all knowledge of his late prisoner. He calls his idea that she may be in the Indian camp a vague suspicion, but the expression of the suspicion alarmed the woman. She is bound he shall not look for Rachel, there."

"Yes; an' obstickles hev been throwed in the way o' his goin'. Hyer the reds an' Golf Harmer's crew are settled down nigh each other, but we heerd mention made of a special permit bein' necessary ter visit the Injun camp. Gammon, all gammon; an' Ash ought ter see it."

"All this care indicates that Rachel really is there. The question now is, shall we look for her there?"

"I say, yes, b'gosh!"

Paul's desires ran in the same channel, and the scouts began to consider the chances of success. Of course nothing could be done during the day, and they would be obliged to lie in ambush during that interval.

Night meant something different. The scouts were accustomed to rough work and all kinds of risks, and if they penetrated the Indian camp it would not be new work. That this was to be done was the idea with both of them, and discussion fully decided the point.

"Et'll be ticklish work," Turk remarked, anon. "Them drasted reptyles know us, an' we can't git up on a rock an' holler, 'Hurrah fer Gin'ral Washington!' without bein' set on."

"I don't know of any good reason why we should 'holler' that, anyway, at this time, but I admit your point. It will be very dangerous to go there, but I don't think we shall back out."

"Back out? You bet we won't!"

Their present position was considered as good as any for the day, and they remained on the cliff and kept up the watch. In the outlaw camp they saw Golf Harmer, Bat Bunker and Alf Cone, together with other familiar faces, repeatedly, but one person they looked for in vain.

This was Eli Gulliver.

The explorers were sinking all personal considerations in their desire to rescue Rachel. That must be their first duty, and others must await their turn, but not for a moment did they forget their debt of vengeance.

They had been close to death, and saved only by a narrow chance. Bat Bunker was guilty of a most fiendish and deliberate attempt to poison them, and in Paul's pocket was the note which proved he had been set on by Gulliver.

All this must be settled for, later.

The mystery surrounding Gulliver was not yet solved. Who was he, really? Whence came his mysterious power?

At present, too, it interested them to know where he was. He did not show himself in the Harmer camp, but events of the past went to show that his affiliation was with the Indians. Was he there now?

"We'll find out, bime-by!" averred Turk, his grim face growing sterner. "I don't forgive a man who tries ter p'izon me; not by a drasted sight! I'll fix him, you bet!"

The day passed without the scouts being molested. There was some like occupation in watching the mountaineers, who gave up most of their time to card-playing, and mixed in an occasional fight as a spice of variety; but, after dark, the thoughts of the watchers turned to the other camp. So did their faces, presently, for, as soon as was prudent, they started secretly for that point.

By the use of due care the trip was successfully made, and, from the high rocks, they began a new watch.

To Paul and Turk, who had seen Indian villages and camps before, this resort presented an unique appearance. It was as much a hybrid as the band, and told plainly that the hands of white men had done as much there as those of red men. Structures were of all shapes, and of all kinds of material that the resources of the region would allow, and the men, though all looking, at a distance, to be Indians, conducted themselves in all kinds of different ways.

Several fires gave the camp strong light, but the scouts looked in vain for signs of Rachel or Gulliver.

Later, the activity began to subside. The men, one by one, sought the huts or lay down in the blankets on the ground. It was, however, well toward midnight when the last of the idlers dropped out, leaving no one astir, as far as could be seen, but three guards.

The latter were posted at the limits of the camp, and were supposed to patrol it on all four sides.

Paul and Turk gave the others ample chance to fall asleep, and then descended from the rocks. It was not hard to pass the guards, and they were soon in the camp. There, the danger was much less than it would have been early in the evening. The fires had been allowed to go un replenished, and had so far died out that, by keeping away from their immediate vicinity, no trouble was to be feared from their light.

But the work marked out was of the most dangerous nature.

It was to seek for Rachel in the huts.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RED CHIEF'S TENT.

"It would be fun ter stir the drasted critters up an' see them squirm!"

Turk whispered the words as he looked around the camp, and his face expanded into a smile, but he had no intention of being so rash.

Already the scouts had arranged their line of operations as far as possible, and they first gave attention to what they had settled upon as the quarters of the chief. This was nothing less pretentious than an oblong tent, and its neatness was in contrast to most of the other habitations.

Going to the rear, the scouts drew out a pin, and thus gained room enough to pass inside. It was Paul who made the venture.

Leaving his rifle with Turk he crawled under the canvas. There he paused for some time listening carefully. The breathing of a sleeper reached his ears. Finally he drew himself up, and then came the crisis. Safer far than to risk a search was the temporary showing of a light, and he cautiously struck a match.

With painful slowness it gained strength, but did its work at last. Then the spy started slightly as he saw the tenant of the place lying almost at his feet; a heavy form which told of no mean strength. His face was partially covered by his right arm, and the hand and face were of the dusky hue of Indian blood.

Other things Pathfinder Paul noted, and he knew the man was a chief of no small importance; to his experienced eyes there was ample evidence of this in the warrior's accouterments, worn and discarded. His sleep was deep and easy, but as one saw his powerful build and the ready weapons it was not hard to realize that an alarm would bring disastrous results.

No one else was visible.

Turning away, the scout made good his retreat, and Turk carefully replaced the drawn pin. A few words passed between them, and then they moved on, their next point of operations fully decided upon.

They were passing between two ordinary huts when, suddenly, there was an interruption to their progress.

They met an Indian, face to face!

Each man half-raised his rifle, for the encounter was startlingly unexpected, but they recovered in time to remember they had planned to act a part in just such a contingency. They stood quiet, and the Indian, himself, was motionless. He was even more impressive than the red sleeper, for he stood six feet high and his presence was dignified in the extreme.

It was he who broke the silence.

"What seek you here?" he asked, in a deep voice.

"Is Tom Tobin hyer?" returned Paul, disguising his voice.

"I know not the man."

"We're told he's jined this band."

"Whence do you come?"

"From Golf Harmer's camp."

"Is this Tom Tobin your friend?"

"Yes."

"You take a late hour for a visit."

"We want to see him on the sly. He ain't in favor at Golf's camp, an' these are risky times. We must keep in with Golf, you see."

More Paul intended to say, to make the situation more plausible, but the Indian interrupted.

"No; I do not see—not as you would have me do, white men. Why should you talk blind-

ly to me? Have you so soon forgotten one you ought to know?"

"Why should we know you?"

"Seek the answer in the past."

The manner of the Indian continued so quiet, so free from hostility and evidence of a desire to alarm the camp, that, although it was clear he did not believe what he had heard, neither scout made any motion to attack him, though on the alert. His latest remarks quickened their wits, and Paul suddenly caught the clew.

"Heart-that-is-Red!" he exclaimed.

"You have not forgot entirely."

"No, no, chief; I remember you, and remember, too, you promised that if we ever met again we could count on you as our friend."

"The promise was made but a few days ago, and Heart-that-is-Red does not forget so quickly. But, now, he sees you in the red-men's camp secretly. That means you are not here as a friend."

"Chief, we have no unworthy object."

"You carry weapons."

"For defense, alone, believe me."

"Dare you say you do not come as spies for any band of white men?"

"We do say so, emphatically."

"Then we are brothers. We have smoked the pipe of peace together, and Heart-that-is-Red then told you he was your friend. He does not forget his word. Why are my brothers in the camp of Eagle-of-the-Crags?"

The question was embarrassing, for he did not believe their former statement, and they did not know how far he could be trusted. While they still hesitated, he added:

"Have friends of my brother met with trouble?"

"That's it, exactly," Paul confessed.

"Your hearts are warni toward the man named Dave Ashmead?"

"Not by a drasted sight!" declared Turk, quickly.

"Who, then, is your friend?"

"Chief," the Pathfinder answered, "we will trust you entirely. I feel that you are made of different stuff than most of those who sail under the rule of the double band of red-men and white. They made trouble for certain white men known to us, but it was not that which brought us here. There is a young woman, chief, whose situation should appeal to your kindest feelings, and we think she is in the camp. Will you tell us if it is so?"

"Who is the young woman?"

"She is of my color, and her name is Rachel Morey."

Heart-that-is-Red was silent for a moment before he replied. Finally he made answer:

"I do not know if she is here. I have been absent many days from my people, and I know not all that has happened since I left. Eagle-of-the-Crags is chief, here, and I am subordinate to him. When I came back, to-day, I talked with him, and he told me of battles the red-men had fought, but said nothing of any maiden here."

"Which is his lodge?"

"It is yonder," and Heart-that-is-Red pointed to the oblong tent.

"I thought as much. I have within this half-hour stood by the sleeping chief. I didn't know who he was, then, positively, but I shall know next time. He was alone in the tent. Nevertheless, chief, I believe Rachel Morey is in this camp."

"Why do you think so?"

Death-Shot Paul hesitated. A brief resume of recent events would make all clear, but was it safe to be so frank with the Indian?

"You can trust me," the chief added, reading the delay correctly.

"I reckon that's so," put in Turk Todd.

The Pathfinder hesitated no longer. Avoiding cumbersome details he told rapidly of the investment of the cave; the disappearance of Rachel; the doubts as to Eli Gulliver; the flight in the canyon; the poisoning episode; their own arrival at the range, and their newest reasons for relieving Rachel was in the camp.

Heart-that-is-Red listened without question, comment or evidence of emotion, but at no time did he appear indifferent.

"Brother," he responded, when the story was told, "there is much in your reasoning that seems like truth. If you told me the maiden was here I would not disbelieve you, and now you say you think she is here, I can see grounds for the idea. Yet, I know not how it is."

"But you can learn?"

"Not to-night."

"To-morrow, then."

"I think it may be done."

"We came to find her this night, but there is danger in the undertaking; great danger, for if we fail we may lose our last chance to save her. Chief, we have smoked together in the past. What can you do for us, now?"

"Paul, when the sun goes down on the morrow I can meet you outside the camp, and I think I can tell you if the maiden is here; any way, you can rely upon me. More than that, I will bring the means so that my brothers can turn themselves into Indians, in looks, and then they can enter this camp more freely. It will be safe, for many who are here as red-men are but painted whites, and no one here knows half

his fellows, from so wide an area have they been gathered."

"Chief, we thank you warmly. But what of Eagle-of-the-Crags?"

"Beware of him!"

"But you?"

"I fear him not. He leads this band, and is my commander, too, but, though all here but a few of my old followers would obey him as against me, I fear him not as a man, nor do I love him. His power as a chief must be heeded. If he knew of my double-dealing I should be powerless here, and, at the most, could hope only for the freedom of an exile."

"You risk a good deal for us, then."

Heart-that-is-Red made a disdainful gesture.

"If I lose rank in a mongrel band, what of it?"

"I am glad you feel that way, for we are eager to accept your proffered help. You are a friend in need, and come like a deliverer. Chief, I would not boast, but other men will tell you that Dead-Shot Paul has some influence on the prairie and in the mountains. Help us in this, and I shall be at your command in the future."

"Brother, your fame is known to me, and I am proud to have such a friend. Brother should help brother. Now I will help you; perhaps you can yet repay the debt. But for this time my word is pledged!"

He held out his hand, which was warmly grasped by both the other men, successively.

"Chief," Turk Todd broke in, "kin you tell us of that drasted varmint, Eli Gulliver?"

"I never heard his name before."

"I'm dead s'art'in he's with this gang. All his kick-ups an' chicaneries at the cave goes ter show it, an' he surely had some ally among them Injuns who besieged us. He's a pestiferous critter cl'ar through, an' I want ter find him an' set down heavy on his anatomy, b'mighty!"

"Brother, I will seek for him, and if such a thing is possible I will deliver him over to you for vengeance."

"Do it, chief, an' I'm your best friend fer all time, I'll be drasted ef I ain't! I'm no mony-maniac life-seeker, but Eli Gulliver filled me up with pizon an' crowed over et, an' I want ter fill him up with lead!"

"Brother, your words are good!" declared Heart-that-is-Red, with emphasis.

At another time these remarks might have caused Paul to smile, for it looked very much as if the chief was willing to see every one who had any authority, or influence, over the band removed from his own path, but it was no smiling matter, now.

The friendship of this man was of untold value to them.

Turk grasped the speaker's hand again and shook it warmly.

"You're a trump, Injun!" he exclaimed; "you are, by thunderation!"

More was said by the scouts to bind the alliance, and then it was formally arranged that they should seek a certain point on the ridge above, and remain in inactivity there until Heart-that-is-Red came to them the next evening. It was a good hiding-place which the chief believed was known only to himself, and fairly safe.

Finally the new allies separated, and Paul and Turk undertook to leave the camp without discovery. This they succeeded in doing, and were soon well past the guards and on their way to the new refuge.

"Perhaps," the Explorer remarked, "we have done better than to accomplish our original errand."

CHAPTER XXX.

A NEW PRISONER APPEARS.

"A DRASTED fine gang, by mighty!"

It was Turk Todd who made the remark, and his words and manner were alike deeply ironical. It was the afternoon following their visit to the camp, and they were in the refuge to which the friendly chief had directed them. It was a cave on the side of the range, hardly large enough for a conventional kitchen, but amply so for their purpose.

Bushes concealed the entrance, and from the cover of these they could watch all that occurred below, and yet were near enough to recognize any one they knew well.

During the day they had seen Eagle-of-the-Crags, Heart-that-is-Red and Golf Harmer, but never Eli Gulliver, nor any sign of Rachel. Thus the hours had passed until it was mid-afternoon.

The scouts lay side by side, idly attentive, as it were, to matters below, but a peculiar sound, close at hand, suddenly caused both to grow alert.

It was the signal agreed upon by their red ally, but it had come several hours ahead of time. For a moment they hesitated to answer, fearing something was wrong, but upon its repetition Paul hazarded a response. Then some one began pushing through the bushes, and Heart-that-is-Red appeared. Not until he was well under cover did he speak.

"You did not expect me so soon?" he then said.

"No."

"I come with news!"

"Good, or bad?"

"You shall hear."

The chief put down the package he carried and added:

"To-night something is planned to occur at the camp which, I think, will interest my brothers. It is an important matter, and I fear it is a blow to you. Whether it can be defeated by us remains to be seen."

"What is it?" Paul quickly demanded.

"On this night Eagle-of-the-Crags is to take a wife!"

"Hal! Who is it?"

"That I do not know, and their lies the doubt. It is a maiden of whom I have learned nothing, but of all those who have joined the band, none has brought a daughter with him, nor have we any red maiden among us to my knowledge."

"Merciful powers! is it Rachel Morey?"

"You speak the fear that is in my mind."

"But is that wretch going to treat his prisoner thus?"

"You do not believe she would consent?"

"Decidedly not."

"I thought as much. Brother, I do not think there are many prisoners in our party, and I believe the maiden you know is there. I have learned beyond doubt that she was in the power of that part of our band who besieged your cave, and was treacherously delivered by some of your party."

"But who?"

"The wife of the man you call Grantlee, and one other. Listen! From the talk of those who were besieging you I have learned this: Attack on your cave was deferred, not because the Indians feared they could not carry it, but because the chief in charge said he had orders to delay. They had an ally inside, and that man was Eli Gulliver. One of the red-men did enter, as you thought, and was seen with Gulliver by Rachel."

"But we then tied the fellow up—"

"Grantlee's wife removed his bonds, and, watching his chance, he captured the maiden Rachel, and delivered her to the Indians outside. Then Grantlee's wife replaced the bonds upon him."

"Drast it!" Turk muttered, angrily.

"When it was known you were going to desert the cave Grantlee's wife made a talking-paper and threw it out of one of the small exits. By the knowledge she thus gave them, the Indians were able to ambush you in the canyon."

"Oh! that p'izon woman!" Turk groaned.

"In that fight there were orders to harm nobody but you, brothers. Gulliver fraternized with the red-men. He was very bitter against the mountaineers you call Bat Bunker and Alf Cone, but an alliance had been made with Flat Nose, whom you call Golf Harmer, and they were spared."

"So as ter p'izon us, eh?"

"It was Eli Gulliver who gave Bunker money to go back and do that work. After you were beaten senseless in the fight you were intentionally left to recover, so you could know how you had been defeated, but the fear grew upon them that you would be dangerous in the future, and Gulliver put the poison in the meat, and money in Bunker's pocket, and sent him back with both, to find you."

"He found us, drast him!"

"The man-hunter, Ashmead, and Grantlee's wife, were saved from all harm, and, with Bunker and Cone, were handed over to Flat Nose. All their grudges were buried. Since then they have been at Flat Nose's camp. Report says Grantlee's wife has been ill there, but there are those who doubt it."

"Me, too!" quoth Turk.

"Gulliver and Rachel disappeared, but I feel sure Gulliver is somewhere in camp, disguised as an Indian, and obedient to the will of Eagle-of-the-Crags. The maiden I can not trace, but if she is fair, what is more likely than that Eagle-of-the-Crags seeks to win her?"

"I am sure that your suspicion is correct," Paul agreed, "but, in mercy's name, can't we prevent this iniquitous scheme?"

"We can try."

"We will try, ef I hev ter wade in alone an' cut a swath right through 'em!" declared Turk.

"You shall have all the aid I can give," promised Heart-that-is-Red. "See!—here I have brought means for you to make yourselves into Indians in appearance, and you can freely mix with those in camp. We will try to prevent the maiden's doom."

How to do this now became the great question, and the three discussed the matter thoroughly. As they could not hope to see her outside the camp, Dead-Shot Paul at the start advocated the plan of making an effort before the "wedding" hour.

As he and Turk expected to have the run of the camp, when disguised, he suggested that they go near the hut where she was believed to be, and then take her out by stealth, or, if necessary, a bold and open effort.

All this he was aware would be risky in the extreme, but whatever they did would be of that nature.

Finally this plan was adopted, subject to the fact that Heart-that-is-Red would be near, and might then be able to suggest a better course.

The chief personally saw to the forming of the disguises, and aided greatly in applying the pigments and other articles, and the work was so well done that the scouts finally were transformed into very passable Indians.

After this the chief went away, and they awaited the fall of night. Experienced as they were they were not wholly free from nervousness, for they had set their hopes fully on the venture, but there was no fear but they would be cool enough at the crisis.

Darkness came.

They left the cave.

Shortly after they sauntered into camp as if going to their own home, but with weapons ready for instant use.

The fires were burning as brightly as on the previous evening, and the camp had a warlike look. Red-men, real and fictitious, were there in numbers, and a fierce-looking band they were. Fortunately, the supposed fact that their union was too recent to make a new face an object of suspicion was not proven a mistake, and no especial attention was given the spies.

They passed near Eagle-of-the-Crag's tent, and the hut supposed to hold Rachel a prisoner within, but saw neither of them. A guard on each side of the hut, however, added to the difficulty of the undertaking.

Beyond the latter point they met Heart-that-is-Red.

"The chief is absent," he said, with a careless air.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. He put Wolf's-tongue in charge, and left word he would not be back much before midnight, probably, but that the marriage would take place at once upon his return."

"We must get ahead of him."

"Yes."

"Can we move soon?"

"I fear we must delay. Ere he went, Eagle-of-the-Crags set the guards by the hut, and Wolf's-tongue is hostile to me. He will not take them away. Trust in me, though; you shall yet see the way opened—I think."

He hesitated before the last words, and the pause was significant.

Just then several more warriors came into camp, and it was to be seen that they conducted a prisoner between them. As this might possibly herald the return of the chief, Paul and his companions at once became attentive. They scanned each face in the group as opportunity offered, but failed to see Eagle-of-the-Crags. But when they gained view of the prisoner they saw the matter was not one of indifference to them.

It was Van R. Barton Grantlee!

There was nothing majestic or defiant in his manner. He was so overcome with fear that his legs wobbled under him and almost failed to do their duty. Never courageous, all his nerve left him as he marched into the camp where to his dismayed gaze, the red-men seemed as numerous as the leaves of the forest. The firelight showed his face to be of a ghastly hue.

"Old Four-Hosses ain't got ter ther settlements, yet," quoth Turk, with a smile.

"Luck is dealing rigorously with him," Paul returned. "I wonder if he will suffer, here, while his wife has a clear swing in the other camp?"

There was no demonstration on the part of the Indians over the new arrival, but Grantlee had something to say. He no sooner came to a halt near the fires than he raised his voice, shrilly but quaveringly.

"I want a messenger sent to Golf Harmer's camp, and sent at once. I will prove to you that I deserve as good treatment as any one. Gentlemen, I never did you any harm. I am the friend of the red-men, and believe in giving them all the rights they want. If I ever get into Congress I will labor for them faithfully. I pledge you this, gentlemen, and now I ask you to be faithful—I mean, I ask that you use me well. I am your br-r-rother, gentlemen. Now, please let me send a messenger to Harmer's camp!"

His quavering utterance ceased, but he was not met with the sternness he might have received from a Sitting Bull, had a leader of that caliber been there. The present band was on the war-path solely for plunder. They had no thirst for blood to satisfy primarily, no wrongs to avenge, and no land to defend.

Hence, hearing the petition, they did not proceed to scalp or burn the trembling pleader, but informed him that his wishes would be deferred to, thus far.

He was put in a tent, underground, and a messenger started across the ridge to Harmer's camp.

The spies were not especially impressed in any way by Grantlee's misfortunes. He was a person so vicious and disagreeable that their sympathies were not aroused for him, but events had shown that he was subordinate in villainy to his wife and Eli Gulliver, so his capture gave the scouts no pleasure.

In due time the messenger returned, and with him came Golf Harmer, Ashmead and Mrs. Grantlee. Arrangements were made for

the latter to enter the tent where her husband was.

When Deadshot Paul saw she was going in alone he turned to Turk abruptly.

"I'm going to try and hear that conversation. It is risky, but the rear of the tent is in shadow, and the risk is worth taking. I'll hazard it; something may come it. And do you try to keep meddlers away from me."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE RED CHIEF COMES TOO SOON.

"DEAD-SHOT, you kin depend upon me while my skulp holds on!"

Turk Todd made the answer in his usual hearty style, and Heart-that-is-Red added his assurance. Then Paul left them and sauntered to the rear of the tent. This point was away from the heart of the camp, and where no one was likely to go unless it was a mere idler. Right there lay the danger; some one who had nothing else to do might take it into his head to wander out of camp by that very course.

There was no way of guarding against such a danger, so the spy lay down, cut a slit in the canvas, and looked into the tent.

A torch was burning, and it revealed Grantlee and an Indian guard—the latter grim and stoical; the former, pale, anxious and nervous. The prisoner's endurance was not sufficient for such an occasion.

There was a stir at the entrance and Martha entered. Red-men were briefly visible back of her, but none entered. Grantlee started up eagerly, but his wife stood cold and reserved.

"Oh! Martha, my wife!" he cried, "I am so glad to see you! I am so glad!"

"Well, don't shout it to the whole camp?" she petulantly requested.

"I did not mean to, Martha, but I am in terrible danger here. My life is in peril! The fires burn luridly outside, and it would be the work of only a few moments to bind me to a stake and burn me to death. It makes me cold to think of it!"

"Never mind; you will be warm enough when you are at the stake!"

Grantlee's eyes dilated. He had not felt sure of his wife, but the unfeeling retort was more than he had expected. His despair increased, and he broke forth presently in a rapid volley of words:

"Martha, I am in a dire situation here. I am the unhappy captive of ruthless men, and my young life bids fair to go out in poignant anguish. They tell me you are in Golf Harmer's camp, free and honored. You must have influence there. Go to Golf and beseech him to save me from my appalling fate. Go, go!"

"Have you been told that you're to be burned at the stake?"

"No, but—"

"Then don't be a fool!"

Grantlee nearly collapsed. Such language from his wife at that moment certainly was trying to the nerves, and it swept away his last hope. His voice grew more shrill as, recovering his breath, he went on:

"You have deserted me! Oh! faithless and perjured woman! is it thus you reward my devotion? I have heard of your evil deeds; of your base conduct with Ashmead. I, your husband, am thrown over and deserted"—here the speaker beat his breast tragically—"while you find comfort with another lover! Not yet have the sods grown green over my grave, yet your heart is another man's! Oh! sweet powers of mercy, guard and protect me! Remember, oh! just Providence, thy promise to care for the widow and the fatherless!"

Mr. Grantlee held up his trembling little hands, and the situation was so ridiculous that Pathfinder Paul had to smile over the last words. Grantlee, possibly, was fatherless, but he could hardly be classed as a "widow." Martha, however, was not moved to pity.

"You have lost what little sense you once had!" she exclaimed, in disgust.

"Oh! unfeeling woman, to what length will you not go? Will you yet stab me to the heart? Ha! if I cannot be your friend I will be your enemy. Go back and make love to Ashmead, if you will, but if I ever get away from here I'll tell you some unpalatable truths. Ha! I'll let it be known that Rachel Morey had no hand in the murder of Mrs. Atherton!"

A quick breath from Paul showed that he heard.

Mrs. Grantlee became less scornful.

"Would you lose your own neck?" she demanded.

"It isn't my neck that would be in danger."

"You would be held equally guilty."

"I doubt it, and, even if I was, what of it? Be Jawve! when I get desperate I am a—a—a desperate man! 'Demit! I'll peach on the whole plot!"

Van R. Barton found he had struck the keynote, and he grew more courageous.

"You would not beso mad as to ruin yourself."

"Wouldn't I?" Barton retorted. "'Demit! you don't know to what a pitch a strong man can go when he is trampled in the dust. Be Jawve! there would be music if I should go back and tell the truth. Suppose I went to the sheriff

and said, "It was a lie when we testified that Mrs. Atherton, with her dying breath, declared 'Sarah Allen did it!' Oh! yes; that would make music, and you, you, madam, would be shown up as a perjurer!"

"What of yourself?"

"But that isn't all," he went on, rapidly; "I could tell all the facts in the case. The Sarah Allen myth would be exploded. You and I know she is innocent, and the whole world shall know as much if you throw me over. Oh! you would like to look out of your prison window and see Rachel Morey go past, a free woman, wouldn't you?"

Mrs. Grantlee was staggered. Any one could see from her looks that these shots were striking home. She looked around nervously.

"Don't speak so loud!" she advised.

"Demit! madam, if you don't help me I will shout so that I can be heard on every peak of the Rocky Mountains! I'll sound your guilt afar; I'll drag you in the mire! Be Jawvel we'll see if you and Ashmead dance on my grave!"

Grantlee felt that he had entered the path to victory, and he blustered bravely and shook his fist at his wife like a miniature pugilist.

"You talk nonsense," averred Mrs. Grantlee, "for I never thought of deserting you; and it is absurd to couple my name with Dave Ashmead's. You are all wrong, and I am just as much devoted to you as ever. Of course I'll help you. But how can I do it?"

"Get your brother to work it. He has influence, some way, with the Indians. You know how. Yes; Eli Gulliver is the man."

"I have not seen him for a week."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Perhaps it's just as well. He ain't a safe man to try and intimidate; he might use me as he did Mrs. Atherton. Let him go, or else keep secret all I've said. I was a bit hasty. Once let him know I had threatened to tell the truth, and he would stab me in the back before two days. Yes; I was 'demned hasty!' and Van R. Barton grew alarmed again."

"I think Golf Harmer can save you."

"Of course he can, if he tries. See him; that's a good girl! Demit, Martha, if we get out of this scrape a great future is before us. I have several schemes for making money; I've had nothing else to think about, lately. My estate may be bankrupt; it is, of course; but I'll be a millionaire in a year—yes; in six months. Be Jawvel! Martha, you shall have all the diamonds and dresses you can use!"

Poor little Mr. Grantlee promised bravely, but the scornful curl of his wife's lip showed how clearly she understood the value of his words.

"I'll see Golf Harmer," she returned.

"Do it, and at once, my dear. He will have me set free; Mr. Harmer is a deuced fine man, you know!"

It was evident that that the speaker was ready to agree to anything if he could save his own neck.

Dead-Shot Paul had lost no part of this conversation, and it had been quite as important to him as to them. By the statement of one and lack of denial from the other, Rachel Morey was innocent of the crime charged against her, and the real guilt lay with the conspirators, Mrs. Grantlee and Eli Gulliver being most concerned, it seemed, with Barton as an accomplice.

Here, then, was proof that whatever might be done for Rachel would be work in a just cause.

Mrs. Grantlee had yielded, but not willingly. Despite the turn her husband's remarks had taken, he must have seen in her half-sullen and wholly undemonstrative manner that she had simply been driven into compliance, and could never again be classed as his sympathizer.

A conclusion having been arrived at, Martha left the tent, and Paul hastened to leave the place and rejoin his allies. As quickly as possible he made known the chief discoveries of the hour.

By that time Mrs. Grantlee had seen Golf Harmer, and he had gone to Wolf's-tongue. A little argument with him sufficed to do the work, and Barton was released. He was on his dignity, however, and while he overwhelmed Golf with thanks and flattery, he ignored Ashmead and was not sociable with Martha.

Evidently, Ashmead did not feel the slight. The presence of Grantlee reawakened the detective's more honorable sentiments, and he could not but be ashamed of recent occurrences. His infatuation, however, did not die out, and he thought longingly of the divorce which would remove Grantlee from his path.

There was nothing more to keep the party there, and though Golf lingered to talk with Wolf's-tongue, preparations were soon made for the return.

At that juncture, however, there was a stir outside the camp, and Eagle-of-the-Crags came marching forward with a dozen warriors at his back.

Nothing could have been more untimely for the scouts, and they looked at each other in consternation. The chief was several hours ahead of the moment when he was expected, and this placed a barrier in the way of their own scheme to rescue Rachel before he came.

As he stood in the strong light of the fires,

Dead-Shot Paul had a much better view of him than before, and an expression came to the latter's face in which doubt and uncertainty were blended. Keenly he surveyed the chief, and then he turned abruptly to Heart-that-is-Red.

"Who is that man?" he demanded.

"Eagle-of-the-Crags."

"He is more than that. By Jupiter! it is Eli Gulliver!"

The Indian nodded.

"You are right, brother; the red chief is red only on the surface of his skin. You know now why Eli Gulliver had so much influence at the cave. He was the leader of all the besiegers, and they did his will. It is easy to understand now."

"Yes; and Paul understood more. It was Eli Gulliver who purposed making Rachel his wife that night!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

TURK STRIKES A GOOD BLOW.

EAGLE-OF-THE-CRAGS called for Wolf's-tongue and spoke with him for awhile, and then sought his private tent. Immediately after, the sub-chief mounted a rock and called for the attention of the warriors.

"Brothers," he spoke, in a loud voice, "within this half hour our great leader, Eagle-of-the-Crags, chief of these independent braves, takes the captive white maiden for his wife. Snake-with-Wisdom, our medicine-man, will marry the two in the way of the maiden's people. This will be done in the great chief's tent, but one side will be raised wholly, so all can see. When it is done, two kegs of fire-water will be set out, and all can drink to the peace, and valor, and future success of Eagle-of-the-Crags."

An approving chorus arose from the warriors.

Martha Grantlee, leaving camp, paused with her eyes glittering.

"I will see this happy bridal!" she declared.

Heart-that-is-Red touched Paul Culver's arm.

"The rescue must be open and bold," he declared, in a low but firm voice. "Secrecy is out of the question. Look! brothers, I leave you now, but I will not desert you. I have men here who will do whatever I say, and I can make a diversion which must be improved. When you see a disturbance, rush forward, you and Turk Todd, and bear the maiden away, though you fell a dozen warriors in doing it. Do you see?"

"I see that we are ready to risk everything for that unfortunate girl, but what of your plan?"

"I cannot tell until I look and plan further, but be you ready to act on the least excitement?"

"We will."

"Drast it, yes!" declared Turk, "we'll git her away or leave our backbone in ninety-nine pieces around hyer!"

"Forget not!"

With this caution the chief went his way.

Paul and Turk were left in a most unenviable frame of mind. The enemy were many; they, but two. All depended on what aid their red ally gave, it seemed, and ignorance of his plan made the scouts feel painfully ill at ease.

Both were determined to prevent the so-called marriage at all hazards. It would have been bad enough had Eagle-of-the-Crags been what he seemed, but revealed as Eli Gulliver, the situation became even worse. He was one in whom no good quality existed; a traitor to his race and a murderer.

"One thing is certain," spoke Turk, soberly, "if no other way is left open I kin prevent the sacrifice. The critter tried ter p'izon me, an' his life is forfeit. I wouldn't take him unawares, willin', but ef it's needed ter save Rachel, this rifle shall settle Eli Gulliver!"

The Dead-Shot made no answer.

Several minutes passed; then one side of the chief's tent was raised entirely by the Indians. This done, Wolf's-tongue went to that other tent where all now knew the prisoner was. Soon he reappeared, leading her. Her manner was marked by the same calm resignation of former days, and the scouts suspected she had not been made aware of the ordeal before her.

Eagle-of-the-Crags reappeared in the opened tent and was there to receive her, which he did in a matter-of-fact way. An unusually homely and brutal-looking Indian appeared, too, as the "medicine-man." The chief looked around to make sure all was ready, and then addressed Rachel.

"White maiden," he began, "you are in great honor this night. You stand with a celebrated chief before his people, and their hearts are warm toward the chief and you. Do you know why this is so?"

She shook her head.

"Because you are now to marry Eagle-of-the-Crags!"

Rachel recoiled. The statement, astonishing as it was to her, was confirmed by the gathering of warriors, and, not doubting the statement, she was appalled. She now knew who the chief was, and the fact that such an idea was in his mind was startling.

"You will be my bride," he added.

"No, no!" she exclaimed. "Surely, you will not exact this fatal sacrifice from me?"

"Sacrifice?"

"Living death, if you will!" she exclaimed.

"By heavens, girl!" the leader of the gang cried, forgetting to keep up his pretense of red blood, "you don't want to be too insolent. I've tamed other persons, and I can tame you so that you will sing a different song. 'Living death,' eh? Now, look you! my lady, you don't want to talk that way. Beware of mortifying me before my own men!"

He grasped her arm and dragged her roughly toward him.

"Will you agree?" he added.

"In heaven's name, spare me!" she gasped.

"In my own name, I'll win you. Object if you dare—mind you, if you dare! Old man, get to work!"

The last words were to Snake-with-Wisdom, and that person, who had been staring stupidly at the bridal pair, managed to comprehend, if the order was so abrupt and thoroughly English. He braced himself for work, and then—

Paul and Turk were growing desperate, but at that moment there was excitement among the men nearest the outskirts of the camp, and they came falling back upon the others. Then a singular rushing, hissing sound arose, and cries of terror passed the Indians' lips.

"Over-the-Fire! Over-the-Fire!"

The name was a terror there, and as the braves got full possession of their wits and legs they came sweeping back like a wave, unintelligible and discordant yells mingled with the utterance of the Fire-Slayer's name.

For a moment the unexpected event dazed the scouts, but Paul presently grasped Turk's arm.

"Be this thing man or devil, the way is open!" he cried. "To the rescue!"

They bounded into the tent.

Eagle-of-the-Crags still stood holding Rachel, but his gaze was turned toward the rear to see more of the cause of alarm. Quickly Paul formed a plan for disposing of him, but some one else was ahead of him. Turk Todd remembered the poison Gulliver had sent them, and was determined to have one blow, at least, for revenge. He swung his clubbed rifle up and, just as his enemy turned, brought it down with no gentle aim.

The chief fell like a dead man, and his face quickly became discolored with the red stream that ran from the jagged wound above.

"That's blow the first, drast yer!" the scout muttered, with great satisfaction.

All this had been quickly done, yet, almost before Eagle-of-the-Crags was down, Paul had seized Rachel. The tumult among the Indians continued, but was not heeded by the rescuers. The Pathfinder found opportunity to say a few words to Rachel which revealed their identity, and then the flight was begun.

The woods were not far away, and a moment of sharp running took the fugitives to cover, but cries of a different nature rose behind them, and they knew a part of the gang, at least, were recovering their wits.

"Et's goin' ter be a hot run!" Turk declared.

"I imagine we can hold our own."

"Where are we goin'?"

Sure enough! In the pressure of other events no one had looked beyond a rescue which seemed almost impossible. In front of the fugitives lay the mountain-side, but no refuge there was known to any one of the trio. They looked in vain for Heart-that-is-Red.

But the enemy was not invisible. They were running to and fro in camp, and a detachment was soon under way. They ran to the woods and came rapidly along in pursuit, urged on by a voice much like that of Golf Harmer.

"Ef they take us *won't* thar be music!" chuckled Turk, as if it were a good joke.

"Do not sacrifice yourselves for me," urged Rachel. "If they are likely to overtake us, I beg you'll leave me and save yourselves."

"We should be the meanest of wretches if we did," Paul answered, quickly. "No, Miss Morey; we win or lose all together."

"Right, by Gin'ral Jackson!" declared Turk.

Few words were wasted. Each of the scouts had hold of one of Rachel's arms, and the flight was more rapid than was to be expected. Still, the pursuers were unburdened, and it soon became evident they were gaining. The need of strategy became perceptible, and the rescuers proceeded to take that course.

In the darkness and the cover of the trees it was impossible for the enemy to sight them; the chase had thus far been on general principles. Here lay the hope of escape. They passed a low cliff, and, knowing the enemy, like themselves, were all above it, turned around the end where it dwindled away, doubled on their own track and awaited the result.

On came the pursuers.

The first few figures to pass were genuine Indians who were running like deer, but not far behind went Golf Harmer, urging his mountaineers to renewed efforts.

There was a moment of suspense, but no one thought of looking below; the whole gang went on like a pack of hounds in full cry.

"Now to get out of sight!"

Dead-Shot Paul had looked longingly at the wild area above; the place best fitted for refuge

of all along the side of the range, but hard to ascend. That way they must go, however, and depend upon chance and Heart-that-is-Red.

They crossed the trail of the pursuers and moved upward. In a short time they were in a more commanding position, as far as the vision went, and close survey satisfied them that they were, for a time, free from danger from direct pursuers.

But that nearly the whole force was out became certain, when, reaching a point sufficiently elevated for a good view, they were enabled to look down into the Indian camp. Comparatively few men were there.

"Yet, I'll bet my big toe, that old Eli Gulliver ain't out a-scoutin'!" Turk declared as they paused to rest.

"You struck a telling blow."

"A right good blow. I don't know of a man who deserved it more, nuther. Eli is a dratted wretch fer whose description no word don't enter inter Daniel Webster's directory, an' sence I got a lick at him, he has a brand he's bound ter sport all his born days."

"The rescue was a gallant one," declared Rachel, warmly, "and I am very grateful to you. Your kindness will not be forgotten while I live."

"Don't mention it, little woman!" Turk requested. "Et wa'n't any more than we should be glad ter had you done fer us, ef we had been placed the same—though, of course, I don't mean the marryin' part; I'm safe thar. But, say, didn't Over-the-Fire get ter work at jest the right time?"

"Turk," asserted Paul, "I have a strong suspicion."

"Give it to us."

"Heart-that-is-Red promised a diversion that would enable us to rescue Miss Morey. The appearance of Over-the-Fire followed."

"Thunder!"

"I see you have the idea."

"Why, et looks as ef Heart-that-is-Red is Over-the-Fire!"

"It surely does, though the idea puzzles me not a little. I would not have thought it."

"I, for one, believe you are right," interrupted Rachel. "You will remember that I told you how, after you left Ashmend's camp, I was rescued by a man who came to me in the confusion of an attack by Over-the-Fire, and rescued me. I now believe it was this same friendly chief. But what can be his object?"

"For one, I cannot surmise. I think, and always have thought, that the Fire-Slayer is the trick of a cunning mind, only. So, too, Turk and I have from the first suspected that Heart-that-is-Red is a white man. But we can talk of this, later. Let us go on!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HIDING IN THE CANYON.

"HERE we may as well rest!"

The fugitives were well up on the side of the range. The Indian camp lay hundreds of feet below, and the men therein were like pigmies to the view. No one was to be seen nearer, though that might be solely on account of the darkness.

Rachel was weary, and even the scouts felt that further climbing was not to be desired.

"We ought ter get a half-way decent place o' shelter right away," remarked Turk, "an' ef you two will stay hyer, I'll look fer one."

He went. At that elevation rocks increased and trees grew fewer in number. Indeed, there was but little vegetation, while the rocks were of all sizes and shapes from the boulder to the towering cliff.

Turk succeeded well. He found a small canyon which, at the bottom, was a hundred yards wide, but was very narrow at the top, and, in some places, had no opening, so steadily did the twin cliffs converge. It was excellent shelter for the night, and to its cover he conducted Paul and Rachel.

No blankets were at hand, but the sand was dry, and when the men had collected a few boughs to make a couch for Rachel, all lay down to rest. They slept, too, long and soundly, and the canyon proved a safe refuge. The night passed without alarm, and morning found them apparently as safe as ever.

Turk was the first astir, and he went out of the canyon and took a general survey of the mountain-side. No one was visible near at hand. The Indian camp remained as usual, and the fact that there was no stir there, indicated that the men were sleeping off the effects of the hard tramp they had endured the previous night.

The scouts consulted.

"We decided, after Rachel's rescue, to come here rather than risk a race for the settlements with both hands in pursuit," observed Paul. "We are still here, and must abide by our decision. The question is, what are we going to do now?"

"We ought ter hev a cave," Turk responded.

"None can be made to order, and we may not be able to find any when wanted."

"Heart-that-is-Red is needed hyer."

"He may come later, but is not here now."

"Wal, see hyer. Dead-Shot, I'll go out and look fer a cave. Et's a blind search, fer ef I

found one, why couldn't the reds do the same? Still, I kin try."

"We must both try. As we were enabled to travel so much on ledges last night, I am sure the enemy can't trail us direct. Careful search on their part may enable them to pick up our trail near enough to here so they will learn our hiding-place, but that we can not guard against. Our attention must be given to other matters. First, we must use our rifles and get food before the Indians are astir. That we will do immediately. Next, we'll look for a better refuge."

"That's all right, Dead-Shot."

The plan was followed. Game was abundant enough to enable them soon to lay in a due supply, but caves were scarce. They found none, and were forced to consider their present refuge as a means of security.

Of course it was not well calculated for a fort. There was entrance at both ends, though the two were half a mile apart, and men might descend from the top of the cliff by means of lassoos. The canyon could be filled with men, and easily won—if its importance was realized.

Right here lay the fugitives' hope of escape. The peculiar shape of the canyon left the lower sides in deep shadow at all times, and, furthermore, the walls were rough and jagged. Clefts and recesses matted their faces at frequent, but irregular intervals, and many of these nooks were deep and and erratic—almost miniature caves in themselves.

Consultation led the scouts to decide that they could have no better refuge.

Search was made, and they finally decided upon one of the recesses. It was high up in the west wall, and large enough to shelter all of them in a time of need. It had a double entrance in the form of two clefts, and though these were but a few yards apart, they might yet be useful.

To this place they carried the rough beds and the food, and then erased all signs of the occupancy of the bottom of the canyon, though the gloom of the vicinity rendered it unlikely that such signs would tell against them, anyway.

Unless they were so environed that, in the future, they were unable to supply themselves with food, there was some reason to hope they would be safe there.

When all this was done Rachel came to Paul as he stood at the south end of the canyon.

"You are risking a good deal for me," she said, in a low voice.

"No more than for ourselves."

"You would not be here were it not for me. You have repeatedly shown your goodness, and I wonder at it, considering the past."

"Possibly you over-rate the past."

"I want to speak of that time. You once gave me a letter, when we were in that far-away town, to deliver to Martha Andrus—Mrs. Grantlee. I did not deliver it. She had told me—"

"Well!"

"That you and she had quarreled, and that she had demanded a written apology of you before morning. Not two hours after you gave me the letter, for her. I fully intended to deliver it, but when I reached her, in the garden, I found her sitting by Barton Grantlee, his arm about her; her head on his shoulder. Believe me, it was not my intention to act the listener, but I was too much surprised to retreat at once. I could not help hearing, and this is what was said: In a few vehement words Grantlee made it plain that he had proposed to her and been refused. Then she said—I remember the words distinctly: 'You plead in vain. I am to marry Paul Culver, for he is richer than you, but there is no harm in a little flirtation, like this, in the meanwhile!'

"Mr. Culver, I was dazed by her words. I never had thought well of her, but this was more than I dreamed her guilty of. When I thought how she was deceiving your confidence, it occurred to me that you might like to know of it before I delivered the letter—your apology, if such it was."

"I went to find you. I failed. While I hesitated what to do, Martha, too, went away, and I could give her the letter only by calling at the now-darkened house and ringing the bell."

"That I did not do, but when I rose in the morning she had left town. Then, for the first time, I was told by her cousin that a condition of your apology was that it should be delivered that night or she would go in the morning."

"She had gone—and I still had the letter! Dismayed, I sought for you, but you had heard of her departure, and, yourself, gone away."

"Mr. Culver, I feel that, in the light of subsequent events, you must often have congratulated yourself upon your escape from her, but I have felt this morning that I must try to clear myself."

Dead-Shot smiled gravely.

"You have done that fully, Miss Morey, but you have been laboring under a mistaken idea as to that apology. I am aware that Martha has told the story that way, and Barton Grantlee has done his share to spread it, but the apology attachment was a creation of their fancy."

"I did quarrel with Martha Andrus. I had been informed that she was not reliable, and by

that I mean that she continued to flirt after engaging herself to me. We quarreled over a report I had heard, but it came to me second-hand, and when I accused her of it, she put in a strong denial, and implored me to see the person from whom my informant had received her news."

"This I agreed to do, and I promised to let Martha know the result by letter that night."

"I went to the party, who denied all; but it occurred to me that Martha might have seen and cajoled him into deceiving me, so I did some cross-questioning. He was old, and I trapped him on his own story, confused him, and finally got him to admit that Martha had actually paid him five dollars to lie to me."

"The story I had heard was correct."

"Then I wrote her, and gave the letter to you. I confess that I was foolish enough not to have the courage to break loose from her at once, but, in the letter, I did write severely, and I told her our engagement was broken, but that if, during the next three months, her conduct was satisfactory, we would talk about renewing it."

"A peculiar condition, I confess, but I was a very young man then."

"You failed to deliver the letter, and Martha left town early the next morning. I always have thought she had learned that her paid man had failed her. Be that as it may, her story that I wrote an apology, or that she ever asked for one, is false. An apology never was mentioned."

"In conclusion, I escaped the clutches of a woman who has proved herself so unwomanly, so false, scheming and criminal that I thank Providence I was saved!"

Dead-Shot Paul concluded heartily, and Rachel quickly answered:

"I don't think you know *all* of her evil-doing."

"To what do you refer?"

"I may be wrong, but I believe she had a hand in the murder of Mrs. Atherton!"

"Why?"

"Because Martha and her brother, Rush Andrus—Eli Gulliver, as you know him—were Mrs. Atherton's step-children, and the family property all went to her."

"Indeed!"

"Perry Andrus was twice married. His first union was unhappy, and his wife left him, taking with her their children, Rush and Martha. He obtained a divorce and married again. In time he died, and his widow married a Mr. Atherton. She never had seen either of her step-children, except that Rush was there, briefly, once."

"Strangely enough, step-mother and daughter met at the Grantlee Sanitarium, but, as both had left the name of Andrus behind by marrying, the truth did not come out. I suspect it did become known, finally, and that it was this which caused Mrs. Atherton's death."

"Mrs. Atherton told me of her first marriage, when I was her maid, but mentioned no names. I failed to see the significance of the story until a few days ago."

"When I disappeared from the cave, that night, I was taken away by Eli Gulliver. Mrs. Grantlee had released him, and he suddenly appeared by me, seized me, prevented an alarm, took me to one of the minor entrances, and delivered me to the Indians."

"After the attack on you in the gulch, the Indians came to the camp with Mrs. Grantlee and the others. Of course she was not a prisoner. It was a conversation I overheard between her and her brother, that gave me the rest of the clew."

"And," questioned Paul, "you think they killed Mrs. Atherton?"

"I do. I only wish I could prove it."

"Like you, I believe it. More, I think Andrus, or Gulliver, struck the blow."

"What do you know of it?"

Paul told of the late interview between Barton Grantlee and his wife, and the husband's accusations.

"Right there is our hope of proving your innocence," the Explorer added. "Barton is a despicable little wretch, who would do no good willingly, and as a party to the crime by subsequent, if not previous knowledge, he would fear to confess; but rouse his jealousy a little more, and promise him freedom from arrest, and he would tell the story with alacrity."

"If it only could be brought about!" Rachel sighed.

"I hope it can; at any rate, we can try when our circumstances will permit."

Turk Todd approached with hasty steps.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A MAN INVADERS THE REFUGE.

"Is any thing wrong?" Pathfinder Paul demanded.

"Nothin' unexpected," Turk answered. "The reds hev took to the war-path, an' Golf Harmer's beauties are with them. Eagle-of-the-Crags has fixed things so that when he takes snuff, Golf sneezes. This is ter be expected, but et'll send a bigger force after us than my appetite hankers fer."

"They haven't got us, yet. Do they seem to have any clew to our whereabouts?"

"No; they're goin' et blind."

"If we only could see Heart-that-is-Red!"

"Why can't we? We still wear our Injun disguises, an' I don't know no reason why they ain't as safe as ever. Why can't we see him?"

"What do you advise?"

"Let me search fer him, right away."

"I don't approve of the plan, for it carries too much risk with it. If you should fall by the way, Miss Morey's defense would be weakened one-half. Wait until night, Turk. We will watch through the day, and lose no chance, but if the chance does not come to our door, as it were, I disapprove of any rash move. When night falls, however, one of us will go to the camp to see Heart-that-is-Red, if possible."

"Let et be me!"

"We'll see, later."

Leaving Rachel, the scouts both sought a point from which a good view could be obtained.

There was enough to be seen. The natural zeal of men to show skill at their chosen calling had, no doubt, been duly stimulated, and red-men and white were alike hotly following the scent. Many of them were near where the fugitives had doubled around the cliff, early in their flight, and were seeking to relocate the trail, but the tramping of other feet had rendered this difficult.

Others had disregarded all these means, and were scattering here and there all over the lower side of the mountain, seeking like bloodhounds.

"Eli Gulliver is thar, an' Golf Harmer, an' Bat Bunker an' Alf Cone, but I don't see Heart-that-is-Red," remarked Turk.

Paul was not so sure he could distinguish those named, but did not doubt that they were all out.

But where was the friendly chief? They looked for him in vain.

Up to noon there had been no danger. The advance toward the higher area had been steady, but not fast enough to give the impression that the pursuers looked to that vicinity for a solution of the difficulty. On the contrary, the general impression seemed to be that the fugitives had taken a direct course across one side of the range and aimed only to get as far away as possible.

Late in the forenoon their trail was found, in places, but even this gave only meager information; the nature of the way prevented successful work, the ledges often hiding all signs. It led, however, to a gradual ascent of some of the searchers along the mountain.

Two hours after noon they were near the fugitives' refuge. It was the plan to search everywhere, as far as possible, and this idea was maintained. They looked into recesses that did, and did not, give promise, and twisted around the rocky way like serpents.

Paul and Turk watched as long as was safe, and then retreated to the canyon and took place in the clefts.

Half an hour later voices were heard below, and a light was seen approaching. The enemy had armed themselves with a torch, and were trying to be faithful to the ruling idea. The scouts stood motionless and kept up the watch.

Nearer came the torch until it was to be seen that three men, all whites, were in this particular party, and Turk grew excited and made some strong comments when it was seen that two of the trio were Bat Bunker and Alf Cone.

The many clefts and recesses in the wall annoyed the hunters. It was plain that if they searched all these points they would spend the whole day in the canyon. As a result they looked to a few and let the others pass.

A vital question now became, would they give heed to the double cleft near the fugitives?

Near this point, and almost under the scouts, Bat Bunker paused and swung the torch about to increase the dull blaze.

"Anybody who would hide hyer would be a durned fool!" he declared.

"I reckon they ain't done it," agreed the third man.

"Dunno erbout that," dissented Alf. "Thar might be a wuss place."

"Yas; down in Brimstone Land!" Bat retorted.

"I reckon you know how that is."

"We should, ef we found them beauties in hyer. They are crack shots, an' they ain't got no love fer us."

"You an' Alf are cuckoos!" tauntingly exclaimed the third man. "Big job you did when Eli Gulliver sent yer back. Bab! you couldn't p'izon a sick cat."

"Cuss it!" snapped Bat, "how was we ter know they was proof ag'in' p'izon? Satan only knows how they escaped. Why they 'et enough ter kill a tribe of Injuns, but I reckon they only growed fat on it."

"We won't gain no fat ef they git a bend on us," remarked Alf.

"Correct; an' that's why I say, keep out o' dark corners. Why, durn et! that Turk Todd don't keer no more fer takin' human life than he would ter drop a lousy wolf!"

"S'pose he would even p'izon a feller. Eh?" banteringly suggested the third man.

"That wuz in the way of business," Bat explained. "Gulliver hired me ter do et, an' I

tried ter, but I went open-like, square an' manly."

"S'pose you told them, square an' manly, thet ther meat was full o' p'izon?"

"Durn et, no; d'ye take me fer a fool? You're hard ter see a thing. Can't you git no logic inter ye?"

"I do, now; I see that logic means you kin kill them an' it's all right, but ef they try it on you, et's a durned mean caper. But never mind, Batsey; let's go on."

"Wait!" requested Alf. "I want ter look in this gap!"

He snatched the torch from Bat and started up the very cleft where Paul and Turk stood a few feet above. Both the scouts had remained with presented rifles and no change was necessary, now. Without moving a hand they kept their gaze upon the climbing mountaineer.

A collision seemed inevitable, and Turk was fairly thirsting for it.

Alf climbed bravely, unheeding the sneers of his allies below, and finally reached a point where the light of his torch flickered on the figures above. Fortunately, they were where a point of rock intercepted the view of those on the sand, while Alf had not looked up. This he essayed to do, at last, and thereby came to grief.

His weight was not well poised, and the change of position brought an undue strain upon a small stone. It gave way suddenly, and Alf, clutching wildly at vacancy, went rolling down the cleft.

He yelled in alarm, and his allies stepped back in a very unheroic way rather than to try and break his fall. The last twelve feet was a clear descent, and he went down with a shock which jarred his whole system and made his teeth clatter together painfully.

The third man laughed loudly, but Bunker was not a participant. Alf had hung to the torch for awhile, but had released his hold at a most unlucky moment for Bat—the blazing brand flew straight for the latter's face, and in a moment more his beard was blazing, too.

He howled in chorus with Alf and clawed at his whiskers in a panic.

Fortunately for himself the danger was soon over, but his hirsute ornament was sadly singed, and a few blisters had been raised to keep it company.

Alf, too, bore signs of the mishap, one cheek looking as if it had been gone over with a curry-comb, and he and Bat proceeded to storm at each other for several minutes. They were too good friends to keep it up, however, and, at last, peace was restored and they tried to take their troubles philosophically.

Even Alf, however, said no more about searching the cleft.

The trio went on, and Paul and Turk were left to meditate on their narrow escape. It was the narrowest of the day, for, though the canyon was twice invaded, subsequently, nobody gave attention to the cleft.

When Paul's watch showed that darkness must have fallen, they went outside. They would not have been surprised to see searching men near, or fires burning on all sides, but not a sign of life was visible anywhere but in the old camp.

There, the fires were burning brightly, and, at that moment, those around them were being constantly reinforced in numbers by men who came in singly, in twos and in threes. Evidently, the hunt was over until another day dawned.

"I claim the right ter go down thar!" declared Turk.

"We did not settle which of us was to go—"

"I'll settle it, Pathfinder; et's me!"

Paul was reluctant to be left behind, and they failed to agree, then. Later, as they cooked and ate supper in the canyon, the argument was renewed in the same friendly way, and Rachel settled it by saying she was not afraid to remain alone, and that it would be safer for them if both went.

To this they objected, but as she persisted bravely that she would suffer no harm, they finally yielded the point and agreed to go in company. They were led to this agreement not a little by the fact that, somewhat earlier, they discussed the possibility of seizing Barton Grantlee and keeping him prisoner until a confession could be drawn from him in the presence of others.

The descent of the mountain was safely made, and they drew near the old camp without adventure.

Before they reached that point they saw that it was a scene of unusual hilarity. The whisky which had before been produced was being dealt out more freely, now, and all were enjoying themselves.

"I wish they'd get blind drunk!" declared Turk.

"No such good luck, I fear."

"Wal, a little of the stuff will go a good ways, an' I hev a notion thar is fun ahead!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

DOOMED TO DIE!

RELYING upon their disguises as Indians, the scouts went close to the camp. The hope of see-

ing Heart-that-is-Red] was not gratified, however; they failed to discover him in camp.

"Ain't them drasted critters pourin' down the whisky, though?" commented Turk.

"Eagle-of-the-Crags would do well to restrain them, or he may yet have a fight on his hands," Paul answered.

"Thar the varmint is, now! Hil be don't look so purty as he did afore I belted him with my rifle!"

The statement was true. When the blow was struck the sharp corner of the breech had caught Eagle-of-the-Crags just right to make a long and jagged wound on the side of his face and head. It must have been a painful injury, and, it seemed, had not been properly cared for. He now looked a sorry spectacle.

"Not much Eli Gulliver left thar!" Turk added.

Again he was right. The happy-go-lucky smile which had been such a mask for him when he was Eli, and had a part to act, no longer appeared. Instead, his face was stern to the degree of ugliness and ferocity. He looked as if he was ready to fight at a word, and even the rough men who followed his lead did not venture to address him.

The attempt to locate Barton Grantlee was not a success. He, his wife and Ashmead were alike invisible.

Half an hour passed, and the scouts determined to make an effort to look into some of the tents and huts where these persons were likely to be. After a *detour* they approached the selected point, and were soon on delicate ground.

It was there, between the tents, but screened from the fires, that they suddenly came face to face with Dave Ashmead.

The latter stopped short and looked hard at them. Instinctively, they did the same, but, remembering their situation, they recovered and would have passed on. But, with a quick motion, Ashmead laid his hand on Paul's arm.

"I know you!" he exclaimed.

Paul looked the detective boldly in the face. Assuming a guttural utterance, he replied:

"The white man talks in riddles."

"You are the riddle, but I have the solution. Others you may deceive, but not me, now I know you are to be looked for in Indian guise, Paul Culver!"

Quietly the Dead-Shot asked:

"Do you say I am the man you name?"

"Yes, emphatically."

"Then, Dave Ashmead, you will seal your own fate by uttering one word of alarm!"

Dropping his pretense of Indian speech Paul spoke sternly and threateningly, and promptly covered the detective with a revolver.

"You need not do that," Ashmead asserted, in a low voice. "I shall not betray you. To you I owe the failure of plans dear to me, but I am not without human feeling. I know you were put in jeopardy of your lives by Eagle-of-the-Crags and Bat Bunker—in brief, that they tried to poison you. Heaven forbid that I should uphold such work as that, or deliver you again to the same men."

"Your goodness o' heart comes late!" scoffed Turk Todd.

"I am still your opponent."

"Oh! be you?"

"You and Paul Culver wrested my prisoner away from me. You doubtless have her now—"

"You ain't sure of it?"

"No, but—"

"Course you ain't; you're sunk inter a dude who is content ter purl soft words inter Mrs. Grantlee's ears in return fer soft-soap and hypocrisy!"

Ashmead flushed.

"Will you reward my generosity in refusing to betray you to the Indians by insulting a lady?"

"Mr. Ashmead," Paul interrupted, "you and Turk never will talk amicably. To both of you I say, don't talk at all. Why flaunt your difference of opinion to the wind? I see no need of quarreling here, but one thing is certain: He who is not with us is against us. Since ill-luck—for so I consider it—has caused us to meet, you must remain our prisoner."

The detective looked rebellious.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"Where is Barton Grantlee?"

"What do you want of him?"

"We shall do him no harm."

"If you find him, it will be by your own efforts. I conceded a good deal to you by promising not to sound an alarm; you now repay me by making me prisoner, and you must work your own way."

Pathfinder Paul was not so sure an injustice had been done. His revolver had been at Ashmead's breast when the pledge was given. The most bitter enemy was not likely to "sound an alarm" under such circumstances.

Ashmead was a prisoner, yet they would gladly have been rid of him. He was a clog upon their movements, and they knew not what to do. Finally, Turk pointed to the trees behind them, and the detective was led that way.

"We've got ter tie you up an' gag ye," Turk then remarked. "Et may strike you as kinder tough on the mourners, but thar's no other way."

We will splice you ter a tree, an' I reckon you'll be found by yer mixed brethren afore the graft takes enough fer leaves ter grow on yer head an' hair on the tree."

The joke did not prevent the detective from remonstrating warmly, and the discussion was under way when others approached so suddenly there was no time to retreat.

Turk pressed a knife to Ashmead's neck, and all stood motionless.

The new-comers paused only a few feet away, and the darkness of the woods did not prevent the scouts from recognizing Eagle-of-the-Crags, Golf Harmer and Mrs. Grantlee. The chief spoke abruptly:

"I have called you two here to consult you upon a certain point. Heretofore we have followed a line of conduct, which, I may say, was a double one; it was at once aggressive and diplomatic. Recent events led me to believe diplomacy is an ill-fitting case here. It must be discarded, and with a heavy hand."

"You talk in conundrums," replied Golf.

"I refer to Ashmead and Grantlee."

"What of them?"

"I have been trying to keep them dancing on a wire. It has been necessary to blind them as to facts. Especially has this been true of Ashmead. The game played against him has been deeper than you imagine. I need not explain it in detail. Enough, that I have made a fool of him."

"He seems ter like it."

"I don't. A fight is on, and there is too much at stake to risk diplomacy with allies who think they know it all, but don't know anything. Ashmead must be removed."

"He seems to be a decent feller."

"It is because you want to get his good will that I have called you to this conference. You think if you can make friends with him, he will stand between you and harm if you get mixed up with the law, later on. You are wrong; he would not help you."

"Why not?"

"He is a monomaniac on the subject of detective work. You've taken him to your village, flattered him, and made much of him, all for one end, but I say he never would do you a favor in return."

"Wal, I dunno," Golf returned, doubtfully.

"So you want ter send him away?"

"I said, remove him: By that I mean, kill him!"

"Eh?"

Golf stared blankly at Eagle-of-the-Crags. He had no conscience to shock, but this summary way of disposing of an ally startled him. It seemed to startle Ashmead, too, for he made a sudden, nervous stir in Turk Todd's grasp.

"You're jokin'," Golf added.

"Now, will you ever learn that I never joke?" demanded the chief, fiercely. "Have I called you here to talk like an old woman, and lie like a society fop? Use common sense, Golf Harmer. I say, Ashmead must die!"

"B'mighty! I object!"

"Do you want him left free to lead a troop of soldiers against us—to capture us—to appear in court against us, and swear our lives away?"

Harmer was staggered, but he suddenly turned to Martha Grantlee.

"Hyer's somebody else will object," he declared.

Unconsciously, perhaps, the detective bent forward as he listened for Mrs. Grantlee's answer. Situated as he was, the prisoner of certain men and just condemned to death by others, words of sympathy from the object of his passion would be very welcome. Calmly came the reply from Mrs. Grantlee:

"This is the first I've heard about killing Ashmead, but I have nothing to say. If you think it best, kill him!"

Ashmead gasped, and seemed to collapse in Turk's grasp.

"But I thought you's dead gone on him!" cried Golf.

"Fool! she has played with him at my request," explained Eagle-of-the-Crags, impatiently.

Mrs. Grantlee laughed.

"I think I've done my work well. Ashmead has been scientifically dangled on the hook, though he has helped me, himself, by being a born idiot. It has been a snap! I've had some fun out of it, but the fellow's shallowness palls on one. If you remove him it will be a burden off my hands!"

The detective gasped again. He was astounded.

"You're a tough one," Golf commented.

"Why? Mice were made for cats to play with; men, for the like amusement of woman. Ashmead has not always amused me. I like a man with some fire in his love, but the detective has none. He has had his day. Shuffl' him off the boards, and give me a rest!"

Ashmead sighed. How his dream vanished! "Martha," continued the chief, "you may object to the rest. It concerns Grantlee."

"Is he to go too? If so, all's well. I'm tired of the whole cast of characters. Get a new company and a new play. Ah! I hate Paul Culver, but—he is a man! If I could tame him—but I can't! Did you say, dispose of Ashmead

and Grantlee? A good half-minute has since passed; why do they still live?"

"Martha, you are a trump, and I am proud to be your brother!" Eagle-of-the-Crags declared.

"She does seem ter be a good one," Golf admitted. "I don't understand you two, though. What in the world ever sent you hyer ter the wild kentry?"

Rush Andrus laughed shortly.

"Blood sent me here!" he admitted. "That deed made me an outcast, though what it was don't concern you. I fled up this way, and have since lived by my wits. Lately, I organized this band. I don't know what will come of it. It's my idea to ravage the whole border, and make our name dreaded by all, but my mongrel crew don't suit me any too well."

"An' you?" Golf added, to Martha; "will you ride in the raids?"

"I may," she responded, shortly.

"You're too clever fer wild life."

"I'm not sure it ever will be safe for me to return to any other."

"It won't," Andrus agreed, "while Ashmead and Grantlee are living."

"Why do you waste words over them?" Martha retorted. "Out of the way with them! This night is just the time. Get your hands on them, wind them up, and then toss them out for the crows and wolves. Hal! with a fair chance I think these things of prey would prove themselves as good detectives as Ashmead!"

The detective shivered perceptibly in Turk Todd's grasp.

"Hear me," pursued Andrus. "I, too, think the matter should be settled. If we would have any kind of luck we must rid ourselves of millstones. We will take the men one after the other, Ashmead first, because he is the most dangerous. Our followers must not suspect the work. Can you lure Ashmead here, Martha?"

"Sure! I have only to ask him to walk with me, and the infatuated fool would go to the fiery pit by my skirts. Tell me your plan, and I'll carry it out."

"You see yonder tree? Well, lead him past that, making sure he is on the right-hand side, and leave the rest to me. Talk sweetly to him. It will keep his attention, and, moreover, he will go into eternity in a pleasant frame of mind, which is no small thing."

"Let me know your plan fully. What will be the means—the knife?"

"The knife! I'll take him wholly by surprise; clap one hand over his mouth to prevent an outcry; and before he can struggle to advantage, drive the knife home."

"Good! I'll bring the lamb to the slaughter, and we'll see what kind of a butcher you make."

Mrs. Grantlee laughed lightly at her own joke, and then tripped away toward the camp.

"That's the proper way ter dispose of an enemy," quoth Golf Harmer, approvingly.

"Ashmead is an obstacle, not an enemy," explained Andrus. "I only wish I could serve certain enemies as he is to be served," and the chief's voice grew venomous. "Dead-Shot Paul and Turk Todd have thus far avoided us, but I will hunt them down if it takes years to do it. They seem to be under a lucky star, though. What saved them from death when they were so nearly poisoned, I don't know. I'll take other means next time. As for Turk Todd, I'll revive a good old Indian custom, and burn him at the stake! The seal of his doom is here—here, where he struck me!"

The speaker put his hand to his bruised head, and Turk smiled as he saw that he had struck home to more than the marauder's physical being.

Andrus and Harmer took position as they had planned.

There was considerable delay, and when Mrs. Grantlee came she was alone.

"I can't find Ashmead," she announced.

"Have you looked carefully?"

"Yes; he's not in camp."

"He will soon return. Go back and wait for him. We want to get him first; Barton Grantlee must wait. If we killed him and lost the detective, he might make himself obnoxious by prying into the matter. Go back, Martha, and wait until Ashmead comes, be it one minute or three hours. He must die to-night!"

"All right!"

Once more the woman tripped lightly away, whereupon the detective signified by a gurgling in his throat that he had something to say.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DONE BY STRATEGY.

SINCE taking position in readiness to meet the doomed man, Andrus and Golf had been several yards distant from the scouts, and the latter now led Ashmead away, without much danger of being heard.

When they paused it was in a yet safer spot, and Ashmead was released from all nominal restraint, though still closely guarded. He leaned against a tree and was silent. They could but dimly see his face, but Paul at least could surmise what was in his mind.

He spoke presently, in a low and husky voice.

"I am stunned, bewildered, dumfounded," he murmured; "I am mortified as man never was before."

There was no reply, and he soon added:

"This has come suddenly, and I confess that I'm unmanned. The evidence of the world would not have convinced me in this, but her own lips have told the whole truth. I am like one staggered and weakened by a veritable blow, and it's hard to recover from the shock of her perfidy."

"Et would 'a' been harder ter recover from the blow of Eli Gulliver's knife, ef she'd lured ye out thar," dryly observed Turk Todd.

"I know, I know; and she would have done this had it not been for my prior capture by you. I have escaped death by a hair's breadth, and at the hands of—"

He paused, made a quick gesture, and went on in a firmer voice:

"Believe me, I am no longer under the spell: the delusion has vanished. Not only have I been enlightened by her own words, but the work is too complete to admit of doubt. She boasted of her success in deceiving me; she agreed to my murder, and did it in flippant tones, the like of which I never have heard from the most hardened criminals I have brought to the bar of justice."

"Be thankful that the mask fell in time," Paul advised.

"I am thankful; not so much because my life is saved, but that I need not die as the fool dieth. That I have been blind so long was not your fault, Culver; you warned me, long ago. How deep my mortification is, my abjectshame, I need not, cannot tell. I, who ought to have been especially discerning, because of my long experience with evil-doers, was the blindest of the blind. It cuts deep, now. The shame is almost unbearable!"

He covered his face with his hands and shivered. Several times Paul had been obliged to touched Turk warningly, to keep that bluff person from outspoken comments; he now cautioned him again.

Suddenly Ashmead aroused.

"The future remains to me!" he exclaimed.

"You must regard me as a groveling wretch, but I may yet acquire some respect. From this time I shall not refer to my infatuation, for my laments would disgust you all the more. The wound to my pride shall be kept secret. But I am a new man—no; I am my old self! I would esteem it a favor, gentlemen, if I could again have a measure of your confidence, and fight side by side with you."

Paul gave his hand unhesitatingly.

"Say no more, Ashmead," he replied. "All our differences are forgotten, and I say it all the more readily because I realize that matters were very much mixed at the start. Your character for honor is quoted all along the border. In this cause it is well that honest men should be united."

The detective pre-sed the speaker's hand in silence.

"Let's go near the camp," Turk suggested.

They went at once. Mrs. Grantlee was not visible, nor did it seem that Heart-that-is-Red had returned.

"Say, them drasted critters are goin' in strong!"

The remark was drawn from Turk by the actions of the allies. They were keeping up their orgy, and going ahead, now, with zeal. They poured down fiery whisky as a man long caught in a desert would drink at a fountain.

This headlong haste caused each of the watchers to arrive at the same conclusion. Andrus and Golf had permitted them to drink freely, but that any sane man, as leader there, would countenance the present consumption of liquor, was not to be expected. This awakened the suspicion that the allies had gained access to a supply not intended for present use, and were pouring it down thus simply because, when Andrus and Golf returned, they certainly would stop the orgy.

"The whole gang will soon be b'ilin' drunk!" declared Turk.

"Let them drink."

"It will make veritable demons of them," Ashmead remarked, uneasily.

"So much the better. I've seen men of their caliber fill up with whisky before. They have only a small stock of brains, and the devil's weapon soon steals away that stock. Then they fall to fighting among themselves. If this only happens here we may see the gang wipe each other out."

"What of Grantlee?" the detective inquired.

"Well, what?"

"Already doomed, he will be menaced on two sides. He will not live through the night. We must rescue him."

"He is no friend of yours."

Ashmead flushed.

"I know, but—but I will humble myself before him."

"Do nothing of the kind. Barton Grantlee has not enough noble qualities to make it pay. Still, he is a human being in peril, and doomed to death; and he is one who may be very useful in the future. We will rescue him if possible,

and at this stage of affairs, Martha seems to be the only person with open eyes."

"Let me toddle the leetle critter away," requested Turk. "I kin git him hyer in a shake."

"Go, then!" Turk went at once. Gravely Paul turned to the detective.

"Mr. Ashmead, your campaign against Rachel Morey is still on, I suppose?"

"I don't know," was the irritable response. "I am a stubborn man, but this matter palls upon me. It makes the best of persons my enemies, and I'm afraid those whom it makes my allies are all knaves."

"Has your faith in Rachel's guilt never wavered?"

"You know the testimony against her."

"The word of Martha Grantlee and her husband."

"True?"

"Is your mind open to evidence that seems to shift the guilt from her to her accusers?"

"By my life! yes—give me evidence to that effect and you will find me as eager as any one to believe it."

Ashmead spoke quickly, and Paul felt a sense of great relief. Briefly he told of the talk between Barton Grantlee and his wife, and the almost-positive assertions then made that Rush Andrus had slain Mrs. Atherton, with his sister's connivance, if not with her personal aid.

"Step-mother and children, with money in the case!" the detective commented. "When we consider the character of the step-children, this becomes suggestive."

"Don't you think it would be well to get them back to the settlements?"

"I wish they were there."

"An idea occurs to me. Wait, though—here comes Turk with Barton Grantlee. Get behind yonder tree, and see what I can worm out of him. Remain quiet until I give you leave to speak."

"I will be invisible."

Ashmead stepped behind the tree, and the other men came up without having seen him. Paul made a secret motion to Turk, and then addressed Barton.

"I hope, Mr. Grantlee, you are not averse to exchanging your former company for ours?" he inquired.

"Demit! any change is welcome. I was a pilgrim and a stranger in that camp, sir. My wife has deserted me utterly; left me after heaping words of scorn and sarcasm upon me. I was left in the tent—a prisoner! Yes, sir; it is a fact. A guard was at the door, and when I tried to go out, he forbade it. Be Jawvel I don't know what would have occurred, only that Mr. Todd took me out by the rear of the tent. Demit! those fiends are getting wild with liquor. I was afraid of them, I admit."

"You have more cause to be afraid of some one else."

"Who is that?"

"Your wife!"

"Demit! do you mean—"

"Listen, and you shall hear what I mean."

Rapidly the Explorer told of the plot to assassinate Ashmead and Grantlee. That the detective was thus doomed did not seem to trouble Barton, but he turned several different shades of white and red on being told he was included in the ban. Anger moved him somewhat, but fear was far more potent.

He shivered like one with a chill.

"Oh! oh!" he gasped, "this is awful. I don't see how they could have the heart to do it! 'Twould be a cruel thing to cut me off in the flower of my youth. Oh! Mr. Culver, protect me! It has been promised that even a sparrow which falls to the ground shall not pass unseen; and, oh! Mr. Culver, I wish you would keep an eye on me!"

The wretched little man was in a condition of mental distress, and he expressed his condition absurdly, but the occasion was too serious for smiling, even on the hearers' part.

"You seem to have been deserted by your friends," Paul observed.

"I have—oh! blackest of perfidy!"

"It is your duty to save yourself at all hazards, and you can do it only by striking at your wife and Andrus, in return. Do you know anything against them through which the law can strike?"

The answer was eagerly awaited. Grantlee vehemently returned:

"I do; I do! It was they who killed Mrs. Atherton!"

"But Rachel Morey—"

"Was innocent! She left the house before the deed was done. Rush Andrus was there secretly; he had to be, if at all, for his crimes had made him an outlaw. He came to see Martha, but it was on the sly. Before that we never knew anything especial about Mrs. Atherton, but Andrus recognized her as a woman who had wronged him out of money,—he thought it was a wrong—and he murdered her to get what money she had there, and for revenge. She never said, 'Sarah Allen did it!'—that was a lie we told. My wife and Andrus made me lie for them, you see, but I had no hand in the murder. Andrus did it, and Martha helped him!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A WILD FLIGHT BY NIGHT.

RAPIDLY had Grantlee told the story, and he had made it too hurried for Dead-Shot Paul's purpose. The latter led him to repeat it in detail, and all the facts came out as the Explorer had heard them before.

Rush Andrus and his sister were wrapped in the folds of the web of crime, and with three listeners to the story.

When it was done Paul went to work to free Grantlee's mind of his grudge against Ashmead. It was no small matter to accomplish, but when Barton was convinced that the detective had been deceived even worse than himself, he changed his mind and agreed to bury the hatchet.

"That is well," Paul commented, "for our own lives depend upon the union of all honest persons. We must work together, or we're lost. Now, you come with me, and Turk shall bring Ashmead here."

So saying, he led Grantlee to one side, and Turk and the detective, both understanding that it was a device to keep Barton ignorant of the fact that Ashmead had been listening to the confession, acted their parts so well that the secret was duly preserved.

When they met neither Grantlee nor the officer was over-cordial, but this fact was ignored. There seemed but little danger of another outbreak.

All this while Andrus and Golf Harmer were lingering in the woods, evidently waiting for Martha to bring the victims to their ambush, and the members of the band were keeping up their carousal. Some of the latter had succumbed to the whisky and were lying on the ground in drunken slumber, while others were unusually gay. Thus far nearly all were good-natured, but an occasional dispute told of latent possibilities.

Andrus was needed there.

Paul and his companions conferred, and the plan to seize Andrus and Mrs. Grantlee met with approval from all but Mrs. Grantlee's husband, and he remonstrated only because he had much rather run away from her than force her to keep him company.

He was overruled, and then the scouts made known the fact that Rachel was under their protection. Ashmead promptly promised to be as faithful to her interests as he had been to the attempted seizure, and the Explorers decided to trust him.

It was an alliance not wholly satisfactory to them, but they were not placed so they could afford to be over-critical, and the detective's past reputation went a long way with them.

It was arranged that Paul and Turk should go for Rachel, while the other two men waited at a safe distance from the camp.

The scouts reascended the mountain and went to their ward. The news they brought was not fully pleasant to Rachel. She had endured so much suffering that the fact of Grantlee's confession did not promise much while they were still in the wild mountains, and putting herself into Ashmead's company was a step so radical that she shrunk from it. At the same time she had learned to trust in Dead-Shot Paul, and his declaration that he believed it would be for the best, caused her no longer to hesitate.

"Moreover," he added, "we now have the positive statement from one of your enemies that you are innocent of the crime charged against you, and Turk and I shall not hesitate to defend you openly and stoutly."

"Right you be, Dead-Shot!" Turk agreed, heartily. "I kept in my Ebenezer in the past when I felt sure this little woman was innocent, but et won't be so now. I'll smash the drasted critter who touches her; I will, b'mighty!"

And the loyal borderman shook his big fist at the camp of the allies, as if defying any man to molest her.

"I will trust in you," Rachel answered, simply.

"Believe me, I think this will be for your best good," Paul declared.

"I know you are sincere."

And so they went down the mountain to meet the event Fate next had in store for them.

When they drew near the camp it became evident that all was not harmonious there. The greater part of the men were on their feet, and all were trying to talk at once. Something had gone wrong. At first the scouts thought that Rush Andrus might have discovered that there was a check to his game, but when it was seen that the allies were engaged in angry dispute, the idea that the liquor had done its work became more reasonable.

This view proved to be correct. When they rejoined Ashmead and Grantlee the former told of bickerings in camp which had grown into personal encounters. Several pugilistic arguments had followed, and a prolific crop of knock-downs had been scored.

Now, a free fight was imminent.

Andrus and Harmer had finally returned to the fires and restored a degree of harmony, but both appeared to have other work on hand. They went again, and then the bickering was resumed.

It was clear that the leaders were looking for Ashmead and Grantlee, and the scouts believed there was a chance to take advantage of that fact. They might have to wait until every one retired to seize the white "Indian" chief, but was it not possible to take him before?

Deprived of his lead, and that of Golf Harmer, the allies were likely to go from bad to worse, and carry their drunken quarrel so far that pursuit would be a farce even if they attempted it.

After due discussion Paul and Turk left the others and went on their mission.

Ashmead, Grantlee and Rachel waited in a state of painful suspense. The detective stood in front of his companions and watched the wrangle below. Originally, the painted white men and the white men who had left their faces as clear as dirt would permit, had been divided into factions without regard to which party any one belonged to, but some slight circumstance had caused a division of the allied force on the original lines, and it was Golf's band against Andrus's.

Suddenly the torrent of feeling leaped its bank. Blows had been exchanged before, but nothing worse. Now, some reckless fellow discharged a revolver, dropping a boisterous rival, and the work was done.

Angry shouts arose, and revolver answered revolver. Then the rival factions sprung at each other.

A fierce fight was begun.

Ashmead became nervous. There was no knowing what turn affairs would take, and he was tempted to withdraw his party to a greater distance, much as he disliked to interfere with Dead-Shot Paul's plans; but the fact that it might delay reunion when such a thing was necessary at brief notice caused him to remain idle.

There was desperate work in the camp, and men lay on the earth who had not been prostrated by the liquor consumed. Golf's men were driving their rivals back, and fast achieving a bloody victory.

Suddenly the Andrus party broke, turned and fled up the mountain-side.

Ashmead was startled. He and his two companions were in the very path of the fugitives, and the conquerors were still pursuing hotly. What was to be done? It was now too late for flight. He turned quickly.

"Girl," he cried, to Rachel, "secrete yourself behind this rock. All depends upon escaping notice. Do this, and they will soon pass on. Be careful!"

Barton Grantlee stood pale and trembling, but the detective unceremoniously forced him down to the ground. All were out of sight as much as possible, but far from safe. The outlaws were running up the hill, and yells of rage filled the air. Nearer yet they came, and Ashmead's heart sunk as he saw they were in the most dangerous place of all.

Through the bushes and over the rocks came the gang, pursuers and pursued all in one confused line.

Rachel, thoroughly frightened, pressed as close to the rock as possible and awaited the result with fast-beating heart. One man, two, three rushed past the rock. Courage was beginning to revive within her when a man stumbled into view and fell so close as to almost touch her as he lay.

Wild and boisterous words were passing his lips, but the meaningless jumble soon gave place to speech of systematic and dangerous kind.

"The gal!" he exclaimed. "By the Eternal! the rest kin nev fight and whisky, but I'll take this darlin'!"

He put out a big hand to seize her, but she leaped to her feet. She saw Ashmead struggling with an Indian. Then her own enemy came up with a hoarse laugh.

"No, you don't, you darlin'!" he cried. "You're mine."

Again he attempted to seize her, but she turned and fled. He shouted angrily and bounded away in pursuit. She had no time to look for possible help, or to look at her new foe; his heavy steps sounded almost beside her, and she had need of every effort to keep out of his reach.

"You may as wal hold up!" he added. "You can't outrun a mountain-goat like me, you bet! Hold on, or you'll git my mad up, an' then I'm ugly."

The caution had an effect exactly contrary to what he hoped for; it only made Rachel run the harder. On, on through the sparse bushes and over the rocks she went; on, until her breath and strength were nearly exhausted. Every moment she expected to feel the pursuer's hand upon her shoulder, or to sustain a fall, but it was he who first came to grief.

He trod on a round, loose stone, toppled over to one side, and then went crashing down a bushy bluff, howling with anger and alarm.

After that Rachel found complete silence around her, and, when she had continued her wild flight for awhile longer, she suddenly realized that she had a genuine respite; and Nature asserted its claim. She sunk down upon the ground, weak and breathless.

She seemed to have the mountain all to herself. As far as she could see there was no sign of life.

The stars shone from the cloudless sky and made the mountain-side fairly light.

She wondered that no one else was to be seen. Could it be possible she had outstripped them all in her flight? Or had she taken an erratic course, and gained some position not to be expected?

For awhile she sat thus, holding her hand over her fast-throbbing heart, but gradually she recovered from both exhaustion and fright. She determined to move on. But comparatively a short distance separated her from her recent pursuer, and if he had escaped serious injury from his fall, he was likely to be on her track. Of him she felt the deepest fear, and this, together with the fact that she was so unfortunately separated from her friends, governed her future course.

She rose, looked for an elevated point from which she could get a better view of the mountain, and moved on.

Now, she believed she could hear the distant shouts of men, but of this she was not certain.

She began toiling up the mountain, but had gone only about a hundred rods when she abruptly came face to face with another person. No burly outlaw was this whom she faced, but the sight was nearly as demoralizing to her.

It was Martha Grantlee!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE WOMAN FOE.

RACHEL was dumfounded, but Martha broke into a triumphant laugh.

"So we have met again!" she cried.

Her companion could not frame an answer.

"Where are your dear friends?" Martha sneered.

"I—I have no friends."

So spoke Rachel, though she was not fully conscious of the fact that she said anything. This woman was so terrible to her, then, that she failed to think clearly, or to govern her words, in the full sense of the term.

Mrs. Grantlee was quick to see the emotions she inspired, and she quickly retorted:

"You don't deserve any friends. Paul Culver has been kissing the hem of your gown in adoration, but he has had his eyes opened. He wants no more of you; he told me so. You have lost your grip, my lady!"

"I do not care to discuss the matter with you," Rachel replied, more calmly.

"No? Am I too bad, or are you too good, for that?"

"It is enough that we are not in harmony."

"You are right; we are not. I don't care to harmonize with one like you."

"I agree with you fully, and we will end our misgivings by separating at once."

Rachel turned away, but was interrupted.

"Wait!" Martha cried, sharply. "You are my prisoner!"

"Your prisoner? You forget yourself; you have no band of ruffians at your back now, and I refuse to be over-awed by you. Let me pass! I have nothing to say to you."

"Well, I have something to say, and I'm prepared to enforce my claim to an audience. This is my argument!"

Quickly she drew a revolver and presented it to Rachel's heart.

"Defy me if you dare!" she added, in her most vindictive voice. "Nothing would give me more pleasure than to shoot you where you now stand!"

There was an eagerness in her manner which was startling, and Rachel knew that her life was in danger in any case, but the scene changed when heavy footsteps were followed by the appearance of Bat Bunker and Alf Cone. Mrs. Grantlee was quick to recognize them.

"Here, you two!" she commanded, "give your help here. I want you to keep with me and see that this woman does not escape."

"Hum-ho! Wah! hoo!" returned facetious Mr. Bunker. "Wot's the go?"

"I have recaptured this woman, and I depend upon you to keep her until we can rejoin the band—if anything is left of it. As a friend of Golf Harmer I call upon you to work for me as for him. You must keep with us."

"Keep with you? Oh! we'll do it, sure! Eh, Alf?"

Bartholomew poked his boon companion in the ribs and grimaced; Alf replied with a deep, "Wah! wah!" and then both laughed aloud.

"Don't be absurd!" Martha ordered.

Bunker leaned upon his rifle and rested his chin on the muzzle.

"We'll be as matter-o'-fact as circumstances will allow," he promised. "Furdermore, we'll 'keep with yer.' Keep with yer? Wal, you bet yer moccasins! Why, gal, we couldn't be driv away from ye. The rival bands hev about chawed each other up, an' Alf an' me was jest allowin' that the place fer Golf Harmer's beauties was at home. We're goin' thar, but we needn't go alone, I reckon. Gal, you an' her go with us!"

"Go with you?"

"That's it."

"Never, never! You brute! how dare you say it?"

Martha's composure was not proof against such an impending calamity, and her voice was

that of a virago as she made the retort. Bunker heard with calmness.

"You may as well yield ter fate, gal. I ain't talkin' cheap talk, you bet! Me an' Alf are gents that know a good thing when we see it, an' we see it now. Don't you be afeard that Golf or the Eagle will git yer; you two belong ter us! Findin's are keepin's. I don't kee a cuss fer the band while we hev sech jolly pooty gals ter cheer our solitude. The home o' the band be blowed! Et's the last place we would go ter. We'll point our Roman noses fer the wildest mountain we kin find, an' thar we four will live forever in peace, love an' happiness. Wah! wah!"

"Wah! wah!" echoed Alf Cone.

Martha stood in silent dismay. She knew these men well enough to be sure they meant all they said, and would keep their threats unless prevented by strong means.

What could she do? She still held the revolver, but lacked the courage to use it she had felt when bravely menacing a woman.

"Men," she finally faltered, "allow us to go and I will pay you well."

"We git the biggest pay by keepin' you."

"Are you deaf to the voice of gold?"

"We ain't deaf ter the voice of woman."

"Believe me, my friends will avenge the wrong if you seek to take me away. They will—"

"Ter perdition with yer friends! We don't kee a rap fer them. Come, gals!—the night wears on, an' we must be wal away from hyer afore another day dawns. Come with us, my pretties!"

He made a motion to grasp Mrs. Grantlee's arm, but she shrunk back and looked imploringly at Rachel.

"In heaven's name, appeal to these men!" she urged.

"They have been your friends in the past," was the cool response; "it is for you to deal with them now."

"But we go to a living death."

"You have done your best to make my life that for some weeks past. This night may show you the touch of a double-edged sword, and a sample of your own work."

"Wal spoke," Bat agreed. "Anyhow, you both go with us."

Again he advanced upon Martha, but she threw herself upon her knees in a hysterical paroxysm of terror, beseeching mercy in wild, almost incoherent terms. She appealed to one as merciless as herself, and Bat roughly lifted her to her feet.

"Stop yer yawpin!" he ordered, angrily. "You'll bring the whole gang hyer in a jiffy. Shut up, or—"

He stopped short. There was a revolver shot, and Mrs. Grantlee utterly collapsed in his grasp.

"Durnation!" he ejaculated. "She's shot herself!"

Footsteps sounded behind the speaker, and a hearty voice shouted:

"Let up, you drasted snakes!"

The mountaineers turned and saw Turk Todd bounding toward them, with Dead-Shot Paul only a few steps in the rear. They knew there was deadly danger to them when this brave pair struck their trail, and each man essayed to use his rifle.

They were too late; Turk sent a revolver shot which made Alf reel and fall, and then sprung upon Bat in time to beat down the rifle. Honest Turk had not forgotten the poisoning episode in the gulch, and he went at Bunker like a panther. Blow followed blow, and the outlaw stood up as stoutly as he could, but he was no match for the scout.

Bruised and almost stunned, he finally fell across his comrade in evil, and both lay quiet.

Rachel was so wrought up with emotion as to be speechless, but she mechanically held out her hands to Dead-Shot Paul. He grasped those hands within his own, but at that moment, before more could be said, a voice broke in upon them, and they saw a tall figure striding forward from the opposite side of the scene.

"Heart-that-is-Red!" exclaimed Paul.

"Whoop!" cried Turk, "this makes one more fer our side. Let the eagle scream!"

"Friends," spoke the chief, hastily, "this is no time for idle talk. Action, alone, will win the day. I have news that Ashmead and Grantlee are in the hands of the enemy, and they will fare hard unless rescued. I think they may be rescued. All day and night I have been at work secretly to win over enough of the band to make a stand against the majority, and as the latter are now weakened by deaths, discords and drunkenness, the way looks promising. I go with my men to the attack. Before then, however, I would speak in private with Rachel Morey. Child, come with me!"

Rachel hesitated before this abrupt call, but he spoke to her in a lower voice, after which she obeyed quickly. They went a few paces away.

"Wal, this seems ter be a battle-field," remarked Turk, looking at Bunker, Cone and Mrs. Grantlee, all of whom were still and silent, but at the observation Martha lifted her head feebly.

"I am dying!" she gasped.

"Who has done this?" Paul gravely asked.

"I tried to shoot the ruffian who would have abducted me. I don't know how it happened, but the bullet entered my own person, instead. I was terribly excited; I may have pointed the weapon directly toward myself. Dying!—dying, and in the midst of my sins!"

"Let your last act be one of justice, then," advised the Pathfinder, seriously. "You have wrongfully accused Rachel Morey. Clear her—"

"And let her live in triumph? Never!"

"Would you die with the black burden on your soul?"

"Die? Die? I can't die!—I am too evil! Send for some one— But there is no doctor within a hundred miles! I am lost, in this world and the next!"

It was a welcome interruption when Heart-that-is-Red returned with Rachel. It was to be noticed that her manner had changed; that the old dread and nervousness was gone.

"I will call my men to bear these wounded ones on litters," remarked the chief. "We go at once to attack the allies."

He sounded a peculiar call, and there was fresh life among the rocks. Men appeared as if by magic, and all stood subject to the leader's will. Nearly all were of the party he had led when first the scouts had seen him. Weary of the the strife and evil doing inaugurated by the allies, they were glad to break away.

It was found that Alf Cone had no need of a litter. His life had gone out with the shot fired by Turk Todd. Bat Bunker was insensible but neither he nor Mrs. Grantlee was in danger of immediate death. They were carried down the range.

The non-combatants were left at a safe point, and then the fighting men went on to the camp of the allies. When they approached, it was to be seen that an hour of vital interest had come.

Perhaps one-fourth of all the allies were there, with Rush Andrus and Golf Harmer at their head, while all were collected around Ashmead and Grantlee. The two prisoners were under a tree, and from the neck of each a rope led to the largest limb above.

A tragedy was about to be enacted.

Heart-that-is-Red lost no time. It was clear that if the two lines were to be saved, action must be prompt. The men were doomed as far as the outlaw leaders could control the future, and Grantlee, at least, showed the most painful fear. The detective was pale but calm.

The order was given; the assailants fired upon the allies, and then rushed forward to the attack.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

LIVES END, AND LIVES BEGIN ANEW.

The fight was over, and Heart-that-is-Red and his men had won. Fierce as the struggle had been, at first, it soon ended, for the defenders were too much under the influence of liquor to last long. Golf Harmer had fallen dead at the first fire, and Rush Andrus was captured by a concerted attack. After that the allies lacked a leader, and soon surrendered in a body.

Ashmead and Barton Grantlee were rescued unharmed.

When Heart-that-is-Red had put things to rights he went to the captive leader. The latter was in his ugliest mood, and, finding himself the object of the victor's gaze, he broke forth fiercely:

"Who are you looking at, you vile traitor?"

"At you, Rush Andrus, Eli Gulliver, Eagle-of-the-Crags, or whatever you call yourself," was the calm reply.

"I am looking at a cur!"

"We will not bandy epithets," the victor answered, wholly unmoved. "I can afford to ignore you, for your downfall is complete. Those whom you have hated all live, and, moreover, Rachel Morey is saved. Martha Grantlee and her husband have both confessed, and you will go back to the settlements to be tried for taking the life of Mrs. Atherton."

"If any one says I did it, 'tis a foul lie. But what is it to you? Why do you turn against me?"

"You shall learn."

Heart-that-is-Red motioned to Rachel, who came forward side by side with Pathfinder Paul, with Ashmead following.

"Child," spoke the chief, "give a brief outline of your life with Mrs. Atherton, as well as before that time, and since. It may interest those here."

Clearly, Rachel knew what was expected of her, for she began without hesitation:

"I am the daughter of Isaac and Rachel Morey, but after I was old enough to remember, I never saw either of my parents. I was told they were dead by the aunt who reared me. When, however, I was sixteen years old, I learned that, long before, my father had fled under the ban of alleged forgery, and that my mother had worried herself into a fever and died in consequence."

"This fact shadowed my whole life, and when, soon after, the death of my aunt threw me upon my own resources, I had a moody frame of mind not in keeping with my youth."

"Finally, years after, I became the companion of Mrs. Atherton and went to the so-called Grantlee Sanitarium, in the West. She was

very kind to me, and no discord ever marred our life together.

"One night she came to me in a nervous state. She said she had seen and recognized a man she had believed dead, and then she gradually broke the news to me that it was my father. She had known him, years before, and known him by sight, too, but had no real acquaintance. Neither had she known he ever had a daughter. Thus, when I first came to her as a companion, my name, Morey, could not in any case have been thought strange, while the fact that I was with her as Sarah Allen—I had taken the name in my moody frame of mind—concealed everything.

"But she said my father had been near; that he had seen me and noted my resemblance to his dead wife, and had besought her to learn more.

"He had left word that if, by any chance, I was his daughter, I should go to a remote town, where he was obliged to go at once, and join him.

"I was skeptical, and refused to go. Then she told me a strange story. She said Isaac Morey had not been guilty of the forgery, but that it had been done by Perry Andrus, her husband before she married Mr. Atherton; and that Andrus had confessed it on his death-bed.

"She never had told any one of the confession, but her affection for me now led her to reveal all. She urged me to go to my father, at once, and let him know the ban was removed from his name. I agreed to go, but only on condition that she wrote out her statement immediately, and made oath to it in the presence of a magistrate and witnesses.

"This she did, and I left Grantlee Sanitarium with the paper in my possession. I still have it. Going to the other town, I could find no trace of my father, and decided I had been deceived wholly—not by Mrs. Atherton, but by an idle vagabond who had falsely pretended to be my father.

"I was about to return to Mrs. Atherton when I received word of her murder, and knew I was accused of the crime.

"The direct and positive, though false, evidence against me, frightened me, and I dared not confront my accusers. Instead, I went further into the wilds, and thus began the wandering life which is not yet ended."

She ceased to speak, and Dave Ashmead quickly added:

"Since I have been the cause of untold trouble to you, let me say, here, that you are fully proven innocent of crime. After all my stupidity and folly I dare not say I congratulate you, but I will do my best to help you right your wrongs."

"I, too, have something to say," interrupted Heart-that-is-Red. "You must all suspect now, that I am not what I assume to be, an Indian; and you will hardly be surprised when I add—I am Isaac Morey, father of Rachel!"

Pausing for a moment, he went on rapidly:

"I never willfully deserted my family. Falsely accused of forgery I did flee until, as I hoped, I could prove my innocence. Then I learned of my poor wife's death, and, most lamentable fact, the same report stated that my child had died also.

"Failing to prove I was not the forger I fled to the far West, sick at heart and reckless, and here I have lived ever since—not as a bogus Indian, as you might suppose, but as a white trapper and hunter. I only assumed Indian guise when I learned that Rush Andrus, calling himself Eagle-of-the-Crags, was organizing a band to pillage the frontier.

"I, too, became an 'Indian,' but only to learn his secrets and baffle his plots. My simulated zeal was so great that, as Heart-that-is-Red, I became third chief in the band.

"Never until very recently did I know his real name was Rush Andrus, and that he was the son of Perry Andrus, the man for whom I had suffered.

"Rachel has told how I saw and recognized her at Grantlee Sanitarium. I was there by chance, saw her by chance, and put no reliance in my suspicion when I asked Mrs. Atherton to talk with her. Much as she resembled my poor wife, I was not so rash as to suppose my child was alive.

"That I did not meet her at the other town, as agreed, was owing solely to the fact that I was accidentally shot by one of my own men, and was, at that time, sick in bed, a hundred miles away.

"When, here on the plains and mountains, I finally met all the actors in the present drama, I held my own secret closely, learned a little at a time, myself, and finally had the whole story. I first revealed my identity to my daughter, but only recently; and now the whole story is public property."

The statements had not been made without interruption. Rush Andrus saw his power, liberty and life going, and his comments were so angry and boisterous that he finally was gagged to make him unable to annoy them.

Those who had been faithful to Rachel hastened to congratulate her. It was not hard to understand why, after such long persecutions, hemmed in by such a web of false evidence, with her accusers on the scene, she had refused to do more

in the way of trying to clear herself than to state, briefly, that she was innocent.

"One thing more," added Heart-that-is-Red, or Isaac Morey, rather, presently: "some explanation is due you in regard to the phenomenon known as Over-the-Fire."

"A few months ago I became acquainted with a hermit and hunter who finally informed me he was the Fire-Slayer, so-called. He was a strange, eccentric man, and seems to have done this work simply as a freak. He had toy velocipedes made—I may so call them—which he could ignite and speed through a camp. Being delicate and combustible, they soon burned to ashes.

"The statement of some that a red figure sat on these carriages of fire was false, and so, I believe, was the charge that men were sometimes killed by Over-the-Fire. I think the hermit was, and is, harmless. He yet lives.

"He gave me some of his curious carriages, and as they could be folded and packed in small compass, I took them along. It was I, then, that used those seen at the outlaw camp, but I am not the genuine Over-the-Fire."

"The first time I used one, it seems that I just got ahead of some demonstration Rush Andrus was going to make, and, perhaps, saved Rachel from his hands. On my second attempt I took her from her enemies.

"Henceforth, I shall not figure as the Fire-Slayer."

"Wal, I'm kinder glad ter hev this drasted mystery explained away," Todd confessed. "Dead-Shot Paul always stood to it that 'twas harmless, but I was an onbeliever. I ain't good at fightin' unseen hoggoblins, but I'm particular pizen on human skunks."

That night Bat Bunker and Martha Grantlee died. The latter left a full confession of Mrs. Atherton's murder. Rush Andrus had done the deed, with Martha's contrivance.

The conquerors of the allies conducted our friends back to the settlements, led by Isaac Morey. There he bade his men farewell, and they went their way.

The death of Harmer, Bunker and Cone, and the capture of Andrus, deprived the allies of their ruling spirits, and they were heard of no more as banded marauders.

Andrus was brought to trial, convicted and legally executed for the murder of Mrs. Atherton.

Barton Grantlee, after the trial, was allowed to go free, and promptly got out of sight.

Ashmead, a humbled and wiser man, resumed his old life in company with his former partner, Ezra Bemis, who had wandered back to the settlements ahead of him.

Isaac Morey left the border, to pass the remainder of his days with his daughter.

Dead-Shot Paul and Turk Todd resumed their old life, but the former made frequent visits to the towns, and, at last it came to pass that the partners separated. Their farewell was said on the prairie, and Turk warmly shook his companion's hand.

"Good-by, Dead-Shot; good-by!" he said, for the twentieth time, perhaps. "It comes a bit hard on me, but what is my loss is Rachel's gain. She's an uncommon fine woman, an' I'm glad you hev got her. The weddin' was gorgeous, an' I 'most wished somebody 'd step up an' offer ter marry me, but I s'pose I'd hev run liko a drasted wolf ef she had. No; Turk Todd's place is with the deer an' grizzlies, an' back thar I'll go. Good-by, Dead-Shot; good-by!"

THE END.

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